

Last of An Ancient Breed: A Side Story to The Last Spartan

by Zgamer

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Summary: A side story to DinoJake's "The Last Spartan" fanfiction following Kyle Nolan, a 2nd Lieutenant in the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. Events from Kyle's service in the ODST, from Shanxi to intersecting events within the source story, will be recorded as he faces his enemies as much as his own personal demons. UPDATE: 03/08/15 NEW CHAPTER UP!

1. Remember Shanxi (Part 1)

**Let me get this out of the way. No, I am not DinoJake using an alternate name. I am just an admiring fan who wanted to lend his talents to The Last Spartan and got DinoJake's approval. **

First off, a huge thanks to DinoJake for all the hard work he has put into **The Last Spartan****, ****DigiDorks****Titan Shock****and his other stories. If you are not reading any of these, check them out!**

I am also very humbled to be a part of this. This was my first fanfiction story and I have had so many terrific experiences working on this. I may not update as regularly as people may like, but I try to deliver the best work I can.

If you are noticing a huge rewrite going on since you last read this, that's intentional. I feel that if I am going to continue with this story, I need to fully update every detail to keep things fresh. So, we are now getting the 2.0 of this story, which I hope to complete within a week or two.

For those unfamiliar with this work, the story follows OC's in the same universe as **The Last Spartan****. Partly a prequel and mostly a parallel story, it is made to fill in spaces unchecked in the main fanfiction as well as compliment the elements already in place. How far the story will continue to go will depend on its reception and DinoJake's plans.**

So with all of that said, we now bring you the story of 2nd Lieutenant Kyle Nolan, the last of an ancient breedâ€¦

* * *

><p>â€¦<p>

1434 Hours, December 15th, 2682.

Chroa's Den

Citadel

Widow System, Serpent Nebula

â€¦.

"Eight fives."

2nd Lieutenant Kyle Nolan leaned back in his chair as the two privates across the table did a double take. He smirked as he glanced down at the overturned dice cups. He had them baited, so now it was just a matter of time. Private Taylor Jensen glanced to Private Devon Resolme before directing his attention back at Kyle.

"Not getting any younger here," Kyle replied with a smirk. Not to say Kyle wasn't somewhat youthful looking. His grown out red hair, piercing green eyes, neatly trimmed beard and overall fit physique shaved a few years off his actual age, or so he had been told.

"You're kidding?" Jensen scoffed.

"Nope. I'm actually getting older by the second," Kyle joked, eliciting a couple chuckles from the group around them. They had been slowly but steadily drawing a crowd since their first round, not that he was surprised. Most humans had never seen a game of Liar's Dice being played, so he can only imagine what the aliens on the Citadel thought.

"It's a big pot, sir," Resolme said pointing to the flashing number on the display in the center of the table.

"Oh, I know."

The privates curiously peaked under their cups. Kyle did the same out of courtesy, focusing his thoughts on the low, pulsing rhythm of the club's music. He let his foot tap slightly to the beat as the privates lowered their cups.

"What kind of game are you playing, sir?" Resolme asked.

"Same one you're playing, private," Kyle replied lowering his cup too. "Or did you forget the last hour?"

"We just barely rolled."

"Then I better be right."

"You do know the odds of that, right?"

"Well, how does the saying go? 'Never tell me the odds?'"

Jensen suppressed a chuckle, but it didn't escape Kyle's notice.

"Sorry," Jensen said. "Just thought you wouldn't blow your retirement fund like this."

"Insults are a sign of shook nerves, private. And I haven't used a credit of my retirement fund here. How much pocket change are you going to walk away with if you lose?"

Jensen scoffed as Kyle checked the area around them. Red, blue and green lights danced around them as dancers did their work on poles above the bar as Asari waitresses served every kind of person their poison of choice. Kyle didn't usually go to clubs, but Jensen insisted on a bar that served Heineken that wasn't one of their regular human run joints. Still, he wouldn't have chosen Chora's Den if he had the option. At least the people at the human bars weren't looking for an excuse to pick a fight with an Alliance soldier.

"Maybe my luck will run out," Kyle then said turning his attention back to the game. "We've each won at least one round, so it's anyone's game."

"There's no way you can win three rounds in a row, sir." Resolme said.

"Then call me a lair."

Jensen checked under his cup again, quickly glancing at both Resolme and Kyle's cups before setting it down. He started to form a smirk as he focused his stare at Kyle. Kyle smiled back as he leaned forward. This is the part of the game Kyle enjoyed most. Liar's Dice was maybe five percent dice rolling and everything else was mind games.

"You seem a little too confident, sir." Jensen said.

"Oh?" Kyle replied.

"The jokes, the attitude, that smile. It's not like you. Elcor have better Poker faces than that."

Jensen was getting cocky, just as Kyle had hoped. He hadn't won the game yet, but if he was wrong, which he doubted, he was going milk the moment as much as he could.

"Well...pride goeth before the fall," Kyle replied putting the tip of his finger on the cup and spinning it along its rim slightly. "Maybe I have the only fives on the whole table. Or maybe I don't. Still...if I'm right, wouldn't that just be the worst? Someone is going to ask, 'Hey! Didn't you have more credits than that?' And you'll say, 'Yeah, but that old lieutenant beat me in a game I challenged him to.' Don't know about you, but that would be hard to live down."

"Not as bad as having a couple of privates clean house right under your nose all because you got a little greedy."

"Wouldn't be the first time for me and it won't be the last," Kyle said as he stopped spinning the cup and placed his hand over it. "So, you want to find out which story we'll be telling? Or do you want to waste more time talking?"

Jensen seemed to have gained a surge of confidence as he leaned forward and placed his hand on his own cup. Resolme followed his lead, feeding off of Jensen's confidence. Kyle tapped his fingers along the cup in anticipation as he could hear some of their spectators guess who was going to win.

"You're pretty bold, sir," Jensen said smiling.

"As are you, private," Kyle replied.

"But I'm not a liar!"

With that, all three of them lifted their cups and quickly scanned their dice. Resolme had two threes, two fives and a four. Jensen had three threes, one five and a two. Kyle had four fives and a one. For a moment, Kyle cursed to himself as he was convinced he had lost. Then something came to his attention.

"Yes!" The privates whooped and cheered at their supposed victory, prompting claps from several of their onlookers. Kyle simply smiled as he let them savor this moment. They made one fatal mistake.

"Hooâ€|" Resolme exhaled. "You almost had us there, sir."

"Yup," Jensen said opening his omni-tool to collect the pot. "It was a good run, butâ€""

"Excuse me," Kyle said wagging a finger at the privates, silencing everyone immediately. "Who said you won?"

Jensen and Resolme glanced at each other confused before looking back to the lieutenant, waiting for some clarification. Kyle could feel everyone else's eyes fall on him as well as he learned forward.

"Do you remember what rule set we agreed on before we started?"

"Yeah, Common Hand," Resolme replied looking over the dice. "Why does thatâ€"?" And that's when the private clued into what went wrong.

"What?" Jensen asked still not getting it.

"Look at my dice again and tell me what you forgot," Kyle asked.

Jensen leaned forward and mentally tallied the numbers again, comparing to his and Resolme's own dice. Somewhere in the middle of this, Kyle sensed a minor pause as Jensen seemed to piece it together. Based on some of the confused murmurs of their spectators though, it was clear not everyone was on the same page. So, Kyle pointed down to his one die.

"That's right," Kyle said with a smirk. "Ones are wild."

Resolme and Jenson's shoulders slumped, followed by a couple gasps from some of the spectators and claps from the others. Kyle stood from his seat and gave a couple mock bows to the crowd.

"Thank you! Thank you," he said as he turned to the table and opened his omni-tool to collect the pot. "Wow, I must say. I mean, not to gloat or anything, but that's a lot of credits I'm looking at andâ€¦well, damn."

"Godâ€¦" Resolme groaned putting his hands to his head.

"Oh, it's not that bad," Kyle replied tapping at his omni-tool. "Besides, you wanted to play this game."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you actually knew how to play this game."

"Well that's what happens when you challenge someone to a game you've only seen on old action vids."

"There's no way you could have guessed that," Jenson interjected more annoyed than Resolme. "What kind of lenses do you have on your eyes?"

"Do you see anything, private?" Kyle said opening his lid slightly before closing his omni-tool. "I don't need to cheat to win. You want to rematch me later, be my guest. In the meantime, I'd suck it up and go enjoy the rest of my shore leave if I was you."

Jenson glared at the lieutenant before motioning to Resolme. "Come onâ€¦I need to top off my glass."

The privates skulked away from the table with some of the other spectators while Kyle pulled out a bag from his pocket to collect the game.

"That was an impressive bluff, human," a Sanghelli said to Kyle.

"Indeed it was, Sanghelli," Kyle replied picking up one of the cups.

"If it wouldn't be too much to askâ€¦" The Sanghelli continued, giving Kyle pause. "I'm sure some of my friends would love to try this game. Mind if you can give me a quick tutorial?"

Kyle thought about it for a moment as he opened up a clock on his omni-tool. He then glanced up at the few people who had decided to stick around. He might have time for a couple more games if they went quick.

"â€¦sure," he said putting the cup back down. "Who else wants to join?"

"I'm in," an Asari said taking the third seat as Kyle and the Sanghelli sat down, with an Unggoy and Salarian standing behind them to join the next game. "So," she said glancing back to the privates at the bar. "They're not too mad are they?"

"They'd be piss poor ODST if they were. They're part of the strongest branch in the Alliance military. They should be used to getting burned by now. Oh and just put all the dice in the cup," he added pointing to the dice in front of the Sanghelli. "Give it a couple good shakes when I say so and turn it upside down directly onto the table."

"That was a lot of credits to risk on a call like that right out of the gate," the Sanghelli said as he and the lifted their full cups. "How did you know?"

"I didn't," Kyle said. "Remember, ones are wild."

"So you knew you might have lost all that money on a wild call?" The Asari asked.

"Every call is a wild call," Kyle added lifting his own cup. "If we knew everything that was going to happen before it did, life would be pretty boring. I mean, did the Spartans always know they would walk out of every fight unscathed during the Human-Covenant War? No, and a lot of them didn't. Still, for everyone no sad story of that son of a bitch who didn't make it, there's at least ten that sound too good to be true. A Spartan besting three Covenant squads with a half-emptied pistol? Another going toe to toe with a Mgalekgolo? These guys weren't afraid to take risks. Oh and shake."

The three of them shook their cups as Kyle continued,. "Some people say this was all because they were such superheroes that they couldn't be beat regardless. Some say they were just better prepared for difficult situations because of their gear and training. In the end though, I think it's something so simple that we forget how true it is"

Kyle looked up to the other two with a smirk as he turned over his cup. "sometimes people are just really damn lucky."

* * *

<p>"<p>

Classified Date, 2657

SSV Harvest

In Orbit Around Planet Shanxi

...

"And how are we going to go in?"

"WE GO FEET FIRST, SIR!"

"Damn right we do!" 1st Lieutenant Dominic Ralston barked in reply to his squad's answer. This little pep talk was a routine for all ODST squads before a combat drop, but few did it with as much gusto as the lieutenant. There was no doubt from his graying temples and rugged appearance that he had done this plenty of times himself and would do it again for years to come.

Which Kyle hoped to live long enough to see. It had only been a few minutes since the Harvest had exited Slipspace with the rest of the first wave of ships and everyone around him was itching for some action. He could see some of the other soldiers twiddling their trigger fingers, gripping their weapons expectantly and trying hard to contain the sweat on their brows.

Kyle was definitely one of those sweating soldiers, letting out a quiet but long sigh to calm his nerves as he gripped his helmet in his hand. It was only his second week attached to Bravo squad and he had barely begun to get the hang of things when they got the call. He knew his first official combat mission would be a big deal, but he never suspected he would one of the first group of people to fight a war against an unknown alien race. It was a far cry from a simple recon mission.

He wiped his brow quickly as he looked back to the lieutenant, who strolled down the line of soldiers in their pods with his hands behind his back.

"You men and women are the luckiest sons of bitches in all the known galaxy," Ralston continued. "You are going to war against a bunch of feckless shit heel aliens who pick on civilian colonies than stand up against the combined power of the Alliance military."

"OOH RAH!" Several of the soldiers shouted in unison.

"Damn right! Even those gas sucking Unggoy have more balls than these 'Raptor' bastards. That's why Admiral Drescher has sent us in the first wave to tear them a new asshole. And if they don't have one, we'll tear them one anyway!"

"OOH RAH!" Kyle joined in with the rest of the soldiers. 'Raptor' was the nickname that stuck with many of the Alliance branches for these new aliens based on how they looked in the vids. It was a tradition as old as the Human-Covenant War to give nicknames to new alien races and the ODST weren't going to give it up just because they got rid of the old ones. These aliens weren't part of their treaty agreement, so there was no need for political correctness here. Now if only the rest of the ODST could agree on calling them this nickname. Some of the soldiers have tried introducing an ODST specific nickname and they wouldn't stop until one stuck. So far, they all kind of sucked. No one said the ODST were known for creativity.

"There's only one thing standing in our way," Ralston continued reaching the end of the corridor and turning back. "We got wind from the 'Spooks' at ONI that the Raptors have put anti-air batteries around the planned landing areas. If they aren't dealt with quickly, we're going to have trouble landing our birds so we can get more armor and support on the ground. Does that sound like a good idea to any of you?"

"SIR NO SIR!"

"Me neither! That's why 'Command' sent the toughest branch in the Alliance military to take those batteries out and make this day the worst day of these Raptors soon to be tragically short lives. They think we'll just turn the other cheek when they slap us in the face?"

"SIR NO SIR!"

"Damn right! They slap us and we ram a foot up their ass. Don't be fooled by our friends from the Sanghelli Empire. They may have graciously sent their soldiers to help, but this is a HUMAN planet. This is a HUMAN colony. So it's only right that HUMAN soldiers will be the ones to teach these freaks that we will not belly up like a puppy and play nice. You mess with one of us. You mess with all of us!"

"OOH RAH!" Kyle shouted again with the group. He couldn't help but feel pumped up by the lieutenant's words. He had been just as angry as anyone else over the news of Shanxi's occupation. The Raptors had bombarded General William's forces for days before they surrendered. He wasn't shocked, since Shanxi only had so much resistance they could give, but everyone was pretty convinced that wouldn't be enough. The Raptors would be close enough to the Mass Relays that, should they too cocky, they could use Shanxi as a staging planet for an assault on Earth.

There was no way the Alliance would even entertain that thought. It took them a while, but they managed to rally their allies from the former Covenant races to launch a preemptive counter-offense to take the planet back. This first fight was simply phase one of Operation: SUCKER PUNCH and it may well be the deciding factor for how their campaign against their Raptors would go. No one wanted this to be a repeat of the Harvest campaign from the Human-Covenant War, so this needed to be just the right morale boost should the Raptors retaliate in force.

"Stick with your groups and don't let them scatter you," Ralston said. "Your priority is the anti-air batteries. Let the other ground forces take on the bulk of their forces. The rest of Drescher's fleet is counting on us, so show them why the ODST is the backbone of this great military."

"Attention," the ship's AI signaled over the intercom. "We have engaged the enemy fleet. All hands prepare to drop in T-minus thirty seconds."

"You heard the hologram!" Ralston barked walking back down the corridor. "Close up and get ready!"

Kyle took deep breaths as he put on his helmet and pressed a button on the pod's side. The hatch door hissed as it slowly sealed him inside this small cramped space. The sounds of the ship filtered out as the hatch fully closed, leaving him alone with his thoughts and the sounds of his anxious breathing. He had only done one proper drop prior to this and it was one hell of a ride. Now he was going to help liberate a planet! Still shaking, he reached out and grabbed the ODST Hurricane Mark II sub-machine gun off the rack to his right. It was long past the point to quit, so he had to grin and bear it as he positioned himself for the drop.

As the countdown timer continued to tick down, Kyle's thoughts turned back to his family. Still gripping his machine gun in one hand, he reached down and gripped the handle of the old fashioned M6D pistol in his side holster. His grandfather carried this gun through the entire Human-Covenant War and it became a family tradition that everyone who served would wear it into their first mission. Sure, it

wasn't as advanced as their current weaponry, but it still packed one hell of a punch at close range. It filled Kyle with some comfort knowing that in a way, his grandfather would be right beside him in this fight.

He synched the TEAMCOM communication system in his helmet just in time to catch Ralston's final words to the squad. "â€"is our time, everyone. Give them hell the ODS'T way."

"Five seconds," the AI said through the pod's speakers. Kyle took a deep breath and closed his eyes as he felt his heart pounding. Anticipation was killing him more than anything right now, so he could only imagine what the action fight would be like. All he could do was wait for theâ€"

"Good luck," was the last thing Ralston said as his pod disengaged and the young ODS'T private plummeted through the _Harvest _towards Shanxi's surfaceâ€|

* * *

><p>Kyle looked down from the artificial sky in the Presidium Commons as a gentle ambient tune played from a nearby speaker. It only added to the soothing environment complimented by the Commons' smooth architecture and white color scheme. It was mostly for show and it was not enough to convince him to live on the Citadel, but he wasn't surprised some people considered this part of it a little slice of paradise.<p>

He pocketed his gloved hands into his Alliance uniform's pockets, nodding to the other soldiers and civilians passing him by on their way to wherever they were going. He was equally as preoccupied with his own thoughts, currently going through a spontaneous burst of self-reflection. Twenty years. He had spent twenty years in service to the ODS'T. That carried its fair share of victories and defeats, let alone all the moments in-between. Still, he worked as hard as any other soldier in the branch to get where he was now.

Still, he didn't like to think that being a 2nd Lieutenant made him any better any other soldier. He was definitely more experienced and carried more responsibility than other soldiers, but it wasn't in his place to brag about his rank. That was for military meetings and formal dinner parties with people he didn't know.

There were none of those today though and he couldn't be more grateful for that. Not only was it a shore leave day, but it was also a shore leave day in December. Seeing other excited humans in the Presidium marketplace only reinforced the fact that Christmas was in the air. The other Citadel races would just have to deal with it.

Kyle stopped at the end of the line for a nearby store and peaked past the crowd to the front. A Krogan jabbered with the vendor about some refund or whatever he was motioning to, which meant that Kyle might be there for a while. He didn't mind though, letting his eyes drift as he watched humans, Sanghelli, Unggoy, Asari, Elcor, Salarrians and more go about their business around him. It had taken a while to get used to so many different races all in one place. The former Covenant races were one thing, but now there were even more cultural fine points and sensitivities to account for. Hell, it was

only a short while ago that the ODSST had officially dropped the nicknames adopted during the First Contact War. Still, Alliance soldiers had to be examples of their race at all times, so Kyle had to learn how to adapt quickly. It was hard not to stare at the occasional person though.

He opened a note on his omni-tool and quickly skim read it. Winning all those credits was for more than bragging rights. There were some outstanding Christmas gift requests from back home and he was going to get the best items he could if he could help it. There weren't going to be any bargain bin gifts this year, no sir. Still, it was going to take a while to track down some of these items. A copy of the new Keyes biography from Jonathan Nylund, a "_My Life with Bipbap_" Omni-Tool customization pack, a subscription to Citadel Home Design's streaming channel, a model replica of the _Pillar of Autumn_, the Emmy Award winning Rain Forest War documentaryâ€¦

"Earth-Clan!" A voice ahead of him spoke.

Kyle looked up to see that the line ahead of him was gone and the Volus cashier was waiting on him. He quickly walked to the counter holding a hand up in apology. "Sorry. Had to check on something."

"I'm sure," the cashier said, taking a breath from his gas tank after every sentence. "Well, welcome to Sirta. How can I be of service?"

"Well I got this list," Kyle said holding his omni-tool up to a scanner. "I just want to see which items from my list you have and if you can gift warp for delivery."

"That we can. Let me check the database for those items," The Volus said pulling up a data pad from under the counter and scrolling through some tabs. "You're not the first Earth-Clan I've met doing holiday shopping today."

"Probably won't be the last either, huh?"

"Don't remind me. It's those last few days that are the worst. What makes humans so crazy about this 'Christmas' anyway?"

"Who doesn't love gifts? We shouldn't need an excuse to give people stuff, but we make them anyway."

The Volus nodded as he put the datapad down. "We've got a few of these items still in stock. You can probably just order the documentary season through the extranet."

"Yeahâ€¦my brother-in-law is one of those old school types who likes having both a hard and digital copy just in case."

"Fair enough. You're probably not going to find much luck with that model replica though."

"Oh?" Kyle said raising an eyebrow.

"That's a popular model with Earth-Clan this year. We sold our last one half an hour ago. You might be lucky with that store though," the

Volus said pointing behind him.

Kyle turned around to see a not particularly busy vendor nearby. What caught his attention, however, was the Turian cashier waiting patiently at the counter.

"Are you sure there isn't a better store?" Kyle asked the Volus.

"Probably, but none that would have that model in stock. I know that Fyl'gun said they ordered extras just in case."

Kyle frowned as he narrowed his gaze at the Turian. He didn't have to think this one over.

"Just ring me up for the items you got," he said tapping on his omni-tool. He was sure some other store was carrying that model that wasn't being run by a Raptor.

* * *

><p>Kyle's drop pod rumbled as it pierced Shanxi's atmosphere and light flooded the window in front of his face. His helmet's visor quickly adjusted for the brightness as he looked out to the distance. He had taken flights through atmospheres before, but something about this view was particularly appealing. Dawn was breaking across the surface as the system's sun peaked over the horizon, engulfing the sky with a flash of orange, yellow and red. It was quite poetic honestly; light piercing through darkness to bring a brand new day to the planet. He should have brought a helmet camera.<p>

Other drop pods soon came into view, speed lines flowing around them as the drop intensified. He noticed several of the pods were Sanghelli ones, with their slick edges giving them a little more velocity than the bulkier Alliance pods. This would be the first big cooperative offensive these two groups will have done since the treaty was signed. It was hard to believe that these races were at each other's throats only a few years back. Now they had a common enemy to unite against.

"All units report say again, all units report in," Captain Jessica Turner's voice crackled over the TEAMCOM.

Kyle winked green through his TEAMCOM as he assumed everyone else followed suit.

"Good," Turner replied. "We're almost groundside."

"What do you think the 'Boneheads' will throw at us, ma'am?" Corporal Kevin Shinjiro asked.

"The what?"

"'Boneheads.' You know, because they got bone like stuff on their faces."

"Whatever. I assume troops and artillery, Corporal. We've got you covered."

Kyle could hear Shinjiro sigh through the TEAMCOM. Each group in the

squad was assigned a VIP whose main goal was to shut down the batteries. It wasn't as easy as it sounds, since none of them had much experience with this race's tech. Still, they had enough experience with the tech available with their races that they could give it a good shot.

Right then, Kyle felt his pod shake violently. He braced himself against the sides as the pod prepared itself for the final leg of the descent.

"Gah!" Private Duerden exclaimed over the TEAMCOM.

"Almost there, folks," Turner said. "Grab your gear andâ€"

A small ding against Kyle's pod interrupted that thought. Which was followed by more dings, whizzing noises and eventually missiles going past them!

"Ground fire!" Turner exclaimed. "Watch out!"

Kyle felt helpless as they continued to drop. The pods were shielded to endure a fair amount of punishment, but a well-placed shot could easily knock them out of the sky. It was hard to direct the pods at this speed, so they could only hope to not getâ€"

Before he could even say that, a missile flew up and stuck Duerden's pod in front of his. Kyle flinched as debris and fire erupted before trailing up into sky. There wasn't even time for that poor man to react before they turned his pod into a funeral pyre.

"Shit!" Shinjiro shouted.

"Stay focused!" Turner shouted back.

Kyle's knees shook as he gripped his gun and peaked out the window. Past the gunfire and missiles, he could make out their target below them. A bunker with a giant cannon placed on top of it sat on a lush grassy hill littered with Raptor forces, barricades and weapon placements. All the ODS would have for cover were large rocks and the barricades should they push these guys back.

Kyle closed his eyes and prayed silently. If God was listening, He surely knew how he felt right now. All he wanted was to land as soon and safely as possible.

"Brace for impact!"

The pod violently shook one last time as it collided into Shanxi's surface. After regaining his footing, Kyle opened his eyes to see that he had landed safely. What's more, the impact had knocked two Raptor soldiers onto the ground in front of him. It was weird seeing these aliens this up close. The vids only showed so much of how they looked with the spikes on top of their heads, the bone-like material covering their faces, the bird like mouths and other features. And here he thought Kig-Yar were ugly up close.

The pod hissed as the hatch prepared to unseal. There was no more time to get ready. Kyle exhaled one last deep breath as his visor displayed his vitals and tactical information. An alarm blared through the pod as the hatch flung open in an

instant.

Showtime!

Kyle shouted at the top of his lungs as he ran out of the pod and shot a flurry of Hurricane rounds at the Raptors. Still disorientated from the impact, they didn't stand much of a chance as they were quickly torn apart.

He ran past their corpses as he spotted his first incline towards ascending the hill. Unfortunately, a group of Raptors were there to greet him with retaliating fire. Kyle quickly dove behind a nearby rock as their rounds flung dirt and bits of rock around him.

He looked back to see several other ODST running up to his position. One took a round to the hip and collapsed to his knees before another round struck him in the chest. Another sprinted like an Olympian firing back at the Raptors with his Gorgon Assault Rifle until he took cover behind another rock nearby. Two more found themselves pinned down behind Kyle's pod trying to fire back against the assailants.

"Covering fire!" The ODST, identified on his visor as Sergeant Terrence Morgan, from the other rock shouted to Kyle. He nodded in reply, poking out from the rock and shooting at the Raptors. The lower elevation was not working to their advantage though, as the Raptors easily moved past their rounds to a barricade. Kyle moved back behind the rock as they redirected fire his way once again.

"We can't hit him!" He shouted through the TEAMCOM to Morgan.

"No shit!" The sergeant replied before redirecting to the squad's channel. "Bravo squad, this is Bravo Three! We've got men pinned down. Requesting support."

"This is Bravo Six! We're taking fireâ€"

"â€"oger that. Moving into positionâ€"

"â€"requesting assistance. We got tangos coming throughâ€"

"â€"damn it!" Morgan cursed. Everyone was dealing with their own problems at the moment, so help wasn't coming soon.

Something that looked like a grenade flew past the two of them and landed in front of the pod, flinging heaps of dirt against it as the other two ODST took cover.

"Nolan!" Morgan shouted to Kyle motioning his arms towards the Raptors. "Here's the plan. We got to moveâ€"

Right then, an energy shot beam zipped between them and struck one of the Raptors between the eyes, eliciting a quick shout before it collapsed. This was followed by a flurry of plasma rounds shooting up from behind the pinned ODST. Kyle and Morgan looked back to see a squad of Sanghelli, Unggoy and Kig-Yar soldiers charge up the hill. Two more Raptors fell behind the barricade before the rest retreated back to a new location.

"Maksimov! Jaskolski!" Morgan shouted back to the previously pinned

ODST. The two of them moved up next to Morgan as the sergeant motioned over to Kyle. "Follow my lead. We got to find Shinjiro. Move your ass, Nolan!"

The four of them broke from their cover and stormed the hill. As they made their way up, more ODST, Sanghelli, Unggoy, Kig-Yar and now Mgalekgolo were charging alongside them. Plasma and bullets shot up the hill as they dodged around the Raptor's rounds.

One Unggoy took a round to his side and collapsed onto the ground wailing as his comrades went to pick him up.

"Leave him!" An Unggoy in a commander outfit shouted to his squad. "Stick behind the Mgalekgolo!"

They followed his orders as they staggered behind the hulking armored brutes. The Raptors might not have feared the humans yet, but they definitely learned to be very afraid of the Mgalekgolo. Fuel rod rounds blasted barricades into pieces as the Raptors' returning fire merely bounced off the Mgalekgolo armor. Kyle grinned as he saw one knock its giant arm shield into two nearby enemies as its bond brother fired a fuel rod round into a nearby vehicle, blowing it up in a green and orange fireball. They were an awesomely terrifying sight!

Things got even better as a large metallic object crashed a few yards ahead of them, squishing a Raptor underneath. It's outer shielding collapsed, revealing a custom designed ODST Mantis walker with a minigun attachment. The walker's legs stretched out and the pilot cage closed up as turned to face the enemy.

"Die, you maggots!" The walker pilot shouted as minigun tore through several Raptors, cutting them to ribbons. Kyle couldn't enjoy this sight for long, however, as he saw an enemy sniper round pierce through the neck of a Sanghelli in front of him. The alien fell onto his knees, gurgling blood out of his split mouth as he futilely held his hands over its throat.

"Go! Go! Go!" Morgan shouted as ODST broke out from behind the armor and returned fire. Another sniper round struck one ODST through the chest, sending him tumbling down until his body came to a stop. A different ODST retaliated by pulling a grenade launcher from her back and blasting a group of four Raptors, with a couple of them getting their limbs blown off. Above them, a hive of Yanme scurried about firing wildly at the Raptors, picking off an enemy for every few of their own shot out of the sky.

At the top of the hill, turrets and reinforcements joined the fight. The ODST and other forces covered hopped between abandoned barricades, the Mgalekgolo and the environment as they fought for every inch they crossed. Every second felt like an eternity as Kyle ran alongside his fellow soldiers, panting as he shot and reloaded as much as humanly possible.

"We've got them on the run!" Turner shouted through TEAMCOM as Kyle spotted her ahead of him. Following behind her was a group of Kig-Yar, surrounding themselves with their shields Roman style as several Sanghelli Zealots barreled headlong through enemy fire with energy swords in hand. Dirt, grass and rocks fell all around Kyle as he looked over to see even more fighting going on all around them

from the rest of their attack force. He couldn't see their progress, but he could only hope they were doing even better than his group was right now.

They hadn't won yet, however, as Kyle was reminded by seeing a Kig-Yar explode into pieces from a grenade blast ahead of him. The Raptors were not going to give up even an inch of soil without a fight and his group met them every inch of the way in a slow climb to the top.

* * *

><p>"That will be a thousand credits!"<p>

Kyle slipped out from his daydream, returning his attention to an Unggoy cashier waiting expectantly for a response.

"Oh right! Sorry," he apologized as he ran some numbers on his omni-tool. After fiddling around on the Extranet for half an hour, he found a store selling a Pillar of Autumn model. It wasn't the nicest looking location and of course the price was jacked up due to demand, but beggars couldn't be choosers in this case.

"All righty! Credits all got and gift wrapped tight!" The Unggoy chirped as he worked the store terminal. "Shipping it in two days."

"Two days?"

"Lots of hummies sending stuff."

"Fine," well, then would it be ok to put in a personalized note before you send it?"

"Sure sure!" The Unggoy said opening a new holographic screen. "What I write?"

"Hm," I dunno. Just write, 'Merry Christmas, Sandy. Love, Uncle Kyle.'

"Awww!" Unggoy said with a chuckle. "Hummies love."

Kyle smiled slightly, not seeing what was so funny but going along with it anyway. The sooner this was done, the sooner he could get back to his ship.

"And done!" The Unggoy said closing the screen. "Thank you for shopping at Dip-Dup's Pawn and..."

"Yeah, that's cool, bye!" Kyle quickly interrupted as he walked away. Better not to waste the gas in that little guy's tank on something he wasn't interested in.

As he made his way towards the nearest elevator block, he took a moment to soak in the muted but more relaxed tones of the Lower Wards. All walks of life passed him by, including a few of the 'lower races' like Jiralhanae and Yanme that you would be lucky to find anywhere in the Presidium. Neon lit advertisements for everything from the latest Asari health product to more...salacious offers sought for his attention at every corner. Video screens broadcast the

latest Citadel Security reports on crimes busted likely a few yards from where Kyle just walked by. Not exactly an ideal place to raise a family, but at least it was more transparent. People on the Presidium were too focused on enhancing their image or the image of their species, where down here everyone just wanted to make it to the next day. Not too far off from Earth life, though C-Sec could do better on tempering the crime rates. Still, if, and only if, Kyle had to live on the Citadel, he might possibly consider a place in these parts.

Business folks, armed mercenaries and other people walked beside him as they all ascended the staircase to the block. He wasn't particularly thrilled to share a lift with them, especially with how damn slow the ride was in those little glass fishbowls they called elevators. You would think that the Keepers would make speeding the process up a priorityâ€¦

â€¦and it looked like they thought so too. As everyone reached the top, Kyle heard scattered groans as the way was obstructed by holographic yellow tape.

"Unscheduled repairs are in progress," an Asari C-Sec officer called out near the elevator as mantis like Keepers bustled about doing their work. "We apologize for the inconvenience. If you need directions to the nearest block, please consult your omni-tools or the nearest map available."

"Oh come on!" A Salarian politician near the front of the group complained. "I've got a meeting at the Presidium in five minutes."

"You heard the woman," a human C-Sec officer next to the other replied. "Nothing we can do. The Keepers go where they please. Give your people a call if there are any problems."

Well, looks like Kyle was going to take the long way. Fortunately for him, he remembered an unorthodox shortcut Sergeant Mink showed him during a trip to C-Sec headquarters. So as the mass of people continued to murmur over their interrupted schedules, he ducked into a nearby alleyway and picked up the pace of his stroll.

If the Lower Wards in general seemed uninviting, this alley was outright a warning of violence. Steam simmered from a nearby floor vent, colored by the bright red lights stretched across the walls. Save for some scattered rubbish and a couple Keepers working nearby wall terminals, it was completely empty. Kyle wasn't armed at the moment, but he figured he could avoid a fight if he just moved quickly. He didn't have a reason to stallâ€¦

"I said get away!"

Kyle abruptly stopped as he heard that shout. The accent and filtered voice meant it was probably a Quarian, but for all he knew it was just some spat with a lover or some family member. Nothing he needed toâ€¦

"You're behind on your payments and Fisk isn't a cheerful person when people try to cheat him."

A Turian? Now they had Kyle's attention. He could recognize that

reverberating drone of their voice from anywhere and it didn't sound like it was just some little argument. And this was happening just up ahead around the nearest bend. Kyle quietly made his way up and pressed against the wall, poking his head out to peek at what was going on.

Three Turian thugs had backed a Quarian female up against a wall. One of them was notably larger than the others, with unique face tattoos Kyle hadn't seen before. The one to his left was a really ugly looking bastard, with left mouth mandibles broken off and burn scars across the right side of his face. The third was a small one brandishing a jagged tooth dagger with a pistol strapped to his hip. With no one around to watch them and no cameras recording this particular place, they get harass this woman easily.

"I paid Fisk in full this morning," the Quarian replied to the large Turian. "Whoever is doing your numbers must be blind."

"Aw, you're going to insult poor Ful'get like that?" The large Turian said mockingly. "Well, I saw his screen myself and I'm afraid the giant zero speaks for itself."

"Zero? I've been paying in installments! How could there be a zero?"

"You tell us, gas sucker," the little one quipped as he stroked his pistol's handle.

Kyle could feel his blood boil watching those disgusting fingers stroke that pistol. It was one thing that these guys were blocking his way to the elevators, but someone was clearly going to get hurt very soon unless something happened.

"We don't suck gas, you racist bosh'tet!" The Quarian snapped at the little one.

"'You racist bosh'tet!'" The ugly Turian mocked. "Guys, I think she hurt our delicate little feelings with her horribly judgmental language."

The other Turians chuckled as the large one stepped closer to the Quarian. "You're going to need more than words to settle a ten thousand credit loan."

"I barely have enough left to eat!" The Quarian protested, noticeably trying to contain a growing sense of panic. "Run the numbers again. Go ask Xanik. I messaged him today about the final payment."

"Xanik's the guy who sent us," the ugly Turian replied as he and the little one also stepped up to the Quarian. "So tell us again, how are we going to resolve this little problem?"

After a few seconds of silence, the Quarian made an attempt to run. She was stopped almost immediately as two Turian hands wrapped around her waist and neck. Kyle could feel his hands slowly but tightly ball into fists.

"Let me go!" The Quarian shouted in an unsuccessful attempt to fight back. "Help!"

"Scream all you want," the large one said with a smirk as he mockingly cupped a hand near his ear. "You hear anyone coming? C-Sec has better things to worry about than a lying little urchin like you."

"Got any ideas, Quin'del?" The little one asked squeezing his arms tight around her neck, bending the poor woman back from their height difference.

"Hmâ€|a couple. But I don't think she's hearing us clearly. Take off her mask so she can give me her full attention."

As the Quarian continued to struggle and the little one reached for her face mask, Kyle was already on the move. He hardly felt his feet touch the ground as he ran straight at the Turians, his eyes locked onto his first target. It had been too long since he kicked some Raptor ass and now he could use self-defense as an excuseâ€|

...

****Codex Entry (Alliance): Orbital Drop Shock Troopers****

A Special Operations unit of the Alliance Marine Corps, Orbital Drop Shock Troopers specialize in small scale, high-risk combat operations. Though known for the eponymous insertion strikes, ODST forces are also trained to handle military and paramilitary responsibilities including long-range reconnaissance, sabotage, counter-contraband, counter-terrorism and guerilla warfare operations.

Previously a fledgling branch of the former United Nations Space Command, the ODST came to fame following successful campaigns in the outer colonies insurrection, the Human-Covenant War and the First Contact War. Their all-volunteer recruitment, chosen through rigorous screening and training procedures, allows for a diverse combat catalogue that seeks out the best in human combat experience. Furthermore, ODST troopers are often tasked with field-testing Alliance weaponry and armor, often receiving customized equipment suited for their operations.

Because of this, the ODST prides itself with a unique sense of identity and brotherhood apart from any other Alliance branch. Though criticized by some for their 'clique' mentality, the camaraderie developed within their squads has shown a statistical improvement in their combat performance. As such, the Alliance's Naval Special Warfare Command regularly attach and rotate ODST squads among Alliance cruisers and outposts to lend their combat expertise as well as boost morale among the other soldiers.

For more information on the ODST's purpose, consult your local Extranet station.

****...****

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><p>Continue on to Remember Shanxi Part 2 to see how all of this malarkey turns out! For those of you who are unfamiliar with

DinoJake's **The Last Spartan** story or want a refresher, click on the link below to catch up:

s/5939286/1/The-Last-Spartan

2. Remember Shanxi (Part 2)

For the longest time, I had wondered how the ODST would fit in the universe of **The Last Spartan**. We saw glimpses of it through references and certain details, but we never got a full character that was an active part of the unit. So that is what I decided to focus my fanfiction on. I sort of randomly picked a name out of a hat for my character and then wrote a story around what I felt that name depicted. Thus, **Last of an Ancient Breed** was born.

Enough of my talk! Here is the conclusion to Remember Shanxi.

â€|

Classified Date, 2657

Turian Bunker

Surface of Shanxi

â€|

"_Do you know why we're called Helljumpers, Kyle?"_

"_Everyone knows sir."_

"_Everyone knows, but not everyone comprehends it. Especially not Greenhorns like you. The Alliance likes to romanticize the ODST as a glorious cause. Strong, able-bodied men being flung into Hell to fight impossible odds. Only the best of the best are accepted. It's the most enviable division of the military. Then your first mission comes and you see that what the ODST really is: cannon fodder. A large wave of good soldiers thrown into suicide missions to die for their planet."_

"_You're still alive though."_

"_Because I wasn't just a good soldier. I was the BEST soldier. I was the best of the best. I didn't charge in like a gun toting monkey hoping to take out as many guys as I could before I died. I was smarter than that. I knew the casualty rates. I knew who my enemies were. I knew what the other soldiers in my squad would do. I wasn't going to be just a good soldier. Do you want to be a good soldier?"_

"_Yeâ€|N-no, sir."_

"_Damn right you don't!"_

â€| "

"_Look, I'm not trying to ruin your big day. I just want you to know the truth. The ODST is a death wish for ignorant young men. They think they're as strong as Spartans before they can even shoot a gun properly, so they are the ones who die first. Those who survive truly are the best of the best because they earned it. They earned the right to be cocky because they can do what other soldiers can't. They know that they're cannon fodder, but they won't let that stop themâ€|and neither will you. You're smart, you're talented and you ARE the best of the best. Now you have to prove it. Show them you can jump into Hell and bring back Satan's head on a platter. I know you can."_

"_Thank you, sir."_

"_Could you just call me grandpa? I know we're both ODST now, but I'm still family firstâ€|"_

...

Kyle drifted out of his thoughts just in time to dodge a grenade explosion. It felt like his body had been on autopilot as he relived that memory. He hadn't intended to suddenly slip into that in the middle of the battlefield. He just did.

His grandfather had always been a hard man to read. He was a veteran of the Human-Covenant war, which everyone in the family knew because he always found a way to remind them. He was a tough man who was not afraid to call out anyone's crap. Yet he was also a very caring person and an inspiration to a lot of people.

Paradoxically, his grandfather cited the war as what brought about his softer side. He often told off those final, desperate hours fighting against the Jiralhanae and how during a particular battle, he suddenly had an epiphany on the value of life. He decided that when the war ended, he wouldn't let himself be hardened like everyone expected him to. He wanted to be a better example and hoped his children would follow that should they ever experience such horrors.

That wouldn't happen to Kyle right now though. He followed everyone up the hill as they reached the bunker housing the anti-air batteries. It had been a hard fought charge. The Raptors were better prepared than they expected. Not to the extent the Alliance had feared, but more than they had hoped. They had lost quite a few men just trying to get up the hill. He tried not to look back to see who they were.

"Raptors to the right!" Sgt. Morgan shouted over TEAMCOM as an enemy squad advanced on them with guns blazing. Kyle's squad laid down suppressing fire as they continued ahead. His shields shimmered, but he kept the pressure on. The squad took cover, trying to find a way to flank the Raptors.

Kyle waited for his gun to cool down. He peaked out the corner of his visor and spotted a lone Raptor aiming a sniper rifle at Cpl. Shinjiro. He poked out of cover to attackâ€|

A sickening, burning sound was heard as two blue plasma prods stuck through the Raptor's chest before lifting him in the air and flinging him into a nearby wall. A crackle of energy unveiled a cloaked

Sanghelli zealot and his energy sword. Two more zealots uncloaked and sliced into the enemy squad. Severed heads and limbs fell to the ground, staining the grass and dirt with their blood. As the fighting moved away from the humans, one of the zealots approached the squad.

"My brothers will handle the aggressors," the Zealot barked as he ran for the bunker entrance, "Let us proceed!"

Kyle followed the Zealot behind Capt. Turner, Sgt. Morgan and Cpl. Shinjiro. The sounds of gunfire, explosions and plasma shots deafened him as more wall surrounded the squad. The design of the building was much more elegant and streamlined than Alliance architecture, with fewer jagged edges and more smooth surfaces. Perhaps not as sturdy, but definitely more efficient. It reminded Kyle of Sanghelli cruiser design. The place was unusually quiet outside of the now fading battle noises, but the group took no risks. Capt. Turner approved their advances as they gave the all clear one room at a time. Still, Kyle couldn't help but be concerned. Could they really have drawn all of the Raptors out of the complex?

At some point, the squad reached the main control panel. The place was massive, with multiple hallways leading in and out of the area. Large generators and computers hummed silently, connecting to the base of the batteries attached to the roof. Capt. Turner motioned the necessary orders. Kyle and Sgt. Morgan kept a watch on the way they came in. The Zealot watched the nearby hallways with his energy sword at the ready.

Cpl. Shinjiro approached the main panel and began hacking away. This wouldn't be an easy task. ONI's AI programs had been working at cracking enemy software since their initial cyber warfare encounters with Raptor technicians, but this was still unknown alien technology. And the Alliance needed hands-on experience from soldiers in the field. It was intimidating yet exciting at the same time.

"Shinjiro, sitrep!" Capt. Turner barked.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, captain," Cpl. Shinjiro retorted, "This is some high grade shit here and I doubt it's even their best stuff. We still don't know a lot about the Boneheads'--"

"Less talking and more hacking," Sgt. Morgan piped in. Cpl. Shinjiro continued quietly, grumbling something under his breath.

Kyle turned to Sgt. Morgan. "Sir, how come we're not just blowing this stuff to kingdom come?"

"Forward thinking, Private," Sgt. Morgan replied, "ONI and Alliance research will want to learn as much as we can if we're going to keep fighting these spike heads."

"You really think this will be that long a fight?"

"This race does not seem the kind to relinquish after one skirmish," the Zealot chimed in, "They will surely retaliate with greater numbers."

"So imagine their surprise when they see their own anti-air batteries firing back at them," Sgt. Morgan added. "We're going to be ready,

one way or another. It's the ODS'T way!"

"Ooh-rah," Cpl. Shinjiro replied subconsciously. Saying rousing stuff about the ODS'T usually elicited that response.

"Can't they just use their AI's to re-program the turrets and combat our hacks?" Kyle asked curiously.

"Well, we don't know how advanced their AI programs are yet," Capt. Turner chimed in. "Don't worry, private. The Alliance has thought this through. They know how to handle these situations."

"Well they didn't figure that activating a mass relay would result in a war."

Kyle's comment kept everyone quiet for a bit. After a couple minutes, Cpl. Shinjiro closed down the control panel and cracked his knuckles. "Done and done. And I have a fail-safe lock on the panel in case they try to turn it back on."

"And if that doesn't work?" Capt. Turner asked.

"We kick as much ass as possible to prevent them from getting here."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Capt. Turner raised her assault rifle and approached the others. "Alright, we need to regroup with the--"

Before she could finish, a sniper shot cracked through Capt. Turner's helmet. Glass, blood and flesh flew out as the shot exited the helmet and her body fell to the ground. A group of Raptors emerged from the way they came in.

"Incoming!" Sgt. Morgan shouted through TEAMCOM. The squad took cover from the enemy fire. The Zealot whipped out a plasma rifle and joined the squad in retaliating. Sgt. Morgan slinked behind his cover and put his hand to his helmet. "This is Bravo squad. The batteries are down, but we have Raptors suppressing our position in the complex. Requesting assistance."

There was no answer from outside.

"Somebody answer the damn TEAMCOM!"

Nothing.

From the corner of Kyle's visor, he spotted multiple objects fly through the hallway right by his feet. Not again! "Grenade!" The squad rushed out of cover as the grenades detonated. This time though, they exploded with large clouds of smoke that kept spewing across the room. They were trying to catch Kyle's squad off guard. Kyle's visor scanner tagged the rest of the squad through the smoke.

"Nolan! Shinjiro!" Sgt. Morgan chimed through TEAMCOM, "The Boneheads are going to pour through any second. Find another way out! We'll regroup outside!"

Kyle heard footsteps approaching their position and he checked the

room, trying to decide which of the nearby hallways would lead him out. After debating it for all of two seconds, he bolted to the nearest one. The smoke had filled the room up completely, forcing him to rely on his thermal vision to escape.

"Come on, you avian bastards!" Sgt. Morgan shouted over the TEAMCOM as he fired at the Raptors. "Gimme all you got! I'm gonna kick your asses six ways to-"

Another loud bang sounded and Sgt. Morgan's TEAMCOM line went silent.

Kyle continued to sprint down the hallway. As he rounded the next corner though, he bumped right into a lone Raptor. It slammed the butt of its gun at him, knocking his Hurricane out of his hand. He reacted quickly by grabbing hold of its gun and wrestling against it.

"There's one over here!" The Raptor shouted in a panic as they struggled. It kicked into Kyle's legs, forcing him onto one of his knees. It then used their combined weight to push and pin him to the ground. After a struggle, the Raptor threw his gun to the side and grabbed hold of Kyle's neck with its left hand. He tried to pry the hand off his throat while landing a punch with his other hand. The Raptor only hesitated for a millisecond before tightening its grip onto Kyle's neck. The look on that ugly bird thing's face was not of confidence as much as it was a hopeful nervousness. He gasped and kicked his legs, feeling the dizziness setting in from the lack of oxygen.

He then noticed where the Raptor's other hand was going. It was reaching for a knife at its belt, causing Kyle to panic. He had to think fast. Both of their guns were too far for him to grab. The Raptor unsheathed the curiously designed blade and prepared to thrust. Just then, Kyle thought of something.

He let go of the hand at his throat and grabbed the Raptor's wrist mid-stab. They squirmed and struggled as his other hand went for his own belt. His eyes watched the knife come closer and closer to his chest. Right when it was about to reach its target, he pulled out his grandfather's pistol and pointed it directly between the Raptor's eyes.

The horrified look on that sorry freak's face was not one to forget as he fired four rounds into its skull. Its shields shimmered and shattered, followed by the spray of blood from the holes in its head. The knife fell limply out of its hand and its body collapsed onto Kyle, still pinning him! He tried to quickly force the Raptor off.

Several shots soared over his head as three more Raptors arrived at the scene. He freed himself from the corpse, using it to take a couple shots, and quickly clambered around the corner to avoid the incoming fire. He looked across the hallway to see his Hurricane on the other side. He had to find a way to reach itâ€|

...which he found as the explosion of a plasma grenade took out two Raptors. The other one turned to see the Sanghelli Zealot uncloak and charge with the energy sword ready to skewer. Kyle used this distraction to rush over and scoop up his gun. The screams from the

Turian being torn up were unsettling to say in the least. He checked the gun quickly and turned to aid the Zealot. In the time he took to get the gun though, four more Raptors arrived and tore into the Zealot with their guns. He fired back, but his shields shorted out from the enemy fire. His body was shredded and with a gurgling roar, he collapsed onto the ground.

Now it was Kyle's turn to get angry! As much as he was an alien, the Zealot was on his side and had helped them plenty. He fired frenetically, dual wielding his Hurricane and pistol. One Raptor went down from the barrage, but the others took cover to fire back. He hid back behind the corner to reload the pistol, realizing he was alone in this fight. If he was going down, he would take them with him. With a deep breath, he heroically charged down the hall firing wildly. He knew his grandfather would kill him if he saw this!

To Kyle's surprise though, they all went down. He was pretty sure not all of his rounds hit them though. It was then a familiar sight came from behind the Raptors. Cpl. Shinjiro lowered his gun when he saw Kyle and chuckled relieved.

"Thank God!" Cpl. Shinjiro said removing his helmet. His youthful Japanese face was soaked in sweat. "You alright?" He said wiping his face with his hand.

Kyle removed his own helmet and holstered his pistol. "Got a bit clipped, but I'm good." He approached the fallen Zealot. As much as he regretted this, the Zealot's weapons could be useful. He took the remaining two plasma grenades from the Zealot's belt and tossed one to Cpl. Shinjiro. "Did the Sergeant make it out?"

Cpl. Shinjiro shook his head as he snapped the grenade to his belt. "Haven't heard from anyone outside either. TEAMCOM's been awfully quiet. Think they're still fighting?"

"If they are, it shouldn't be for much longer." Kyle checked the Zealot's Plasma Rifle. It only had a few shots left. Not enough to help in a fight. He dropped it and faced the corporal. "Think you're ready to kick some more ass?"

"Ooh-rah!" Cpl. Shinjiro exclaimed quietly. They put their helmets back on and proceeded into a nearby room to return to the entrance. They kept their backs facing each other, covering both sides should they be flanked. One could never be too cautious.

After finding their way back to the entrance, Kyle peered out from behind the doorway. Aside from the corpses of fallen Turians, humans, Sanghelli and Unggoy, the area looked clear. He could hear the rumbles of explosions in the distance, which meant that at least some people were still in the fight. Kyle turned to Cpl. Shinjiro and gave a thumbs up. With his thumbs up in return, the two of them rushed outside.

As they exited, Kyle immediately felt something was very wrong. He turned to his right and confirmed the bad feeling. A Turian M-080, one of their main anti-infantry vehicles, was waiting right outside for them. He could hear its mounted machine gun whirring and preparing to fire—

—

1621 Hours, December 15th, 2682

Lower Wards Back Alleys

Citadel

Widow System, Serpent Nebula

â€|

The small Turian thug barely turned around before Kyle landed a rock hard punch into his face. Its grip released the Quarian and she scrambled away as the fighting commenced. Kyle saw the thug reach for the pistol on his belt and grabbed his hand. He lifted it with the Turian still holding on and fired. The ugly thug's knee fell down shouting in pain as it's knee punctured with a blood spurt. Good! Their shields weren't on. They probably didn't expect the Quarian to put up a fight.

He twisted the pistol out of the small thug's hand and shoved him into the large one, causing them to stumble. Kyle rushed over and gave a swift upward kick into the ugly one's face, stunning the thug as he collapsed.

The other two thugs got to their feet and rushed towards Kyle. The large one swung a fist wildly towards his face. Kyle dodged it and gave a jab into the thug's gut. The small one pulled out a knife and swung it at Kyle. After a few dodges, Kyle grabbed the small one's wrist and jammed a fist hard upwards into his arm.

The small one screamed as a sickening crunch came from his arm. Kyle forced the knife out from his hand and gave another firm punch to the thug's face. The small thug collapsed, cradling its arm as it lost consciousness.

Kyle saw the large thug pull out a pistol and rolled out of the way as two shots flew past at him. Before more shots could be fired, Kyle flung his newly acquired knife. It embedded into the Turian's shoulder, causing him to drop the pistol. This gave Kyle the distraction to rush forward, grab the thug by the throat and slam him into the nearby wall. The Turian tried to pry Kyle's hand off, but he punched into the thug's face. Then he punched again. And again. Kyle didn't feel like he would ever stop. Each successful blow reverberated in his ears. When the Turian finally slumped from fatigue, Kyle flung him to the ground. Its body rolled to a stop, too weak to get back up.

Kyle stood where he was, breathing deeply with rage. It took him a few seconds to relax and recall what happened. He had been on autopilot again. The last several seconds repeated itself in his mind in slow motion. His moves were so seamlessly transitioned that they felt like a blur. And yetâ€|it also felt reallyâ€|really goodâ€|

"BEHIND YOU!" The Quarian shouted to Kyle. He turned just in time to see a large metal pipe slam into his side. He fell to the ground and saw his assailant. The ugly Turian stood over him with a pipe it had picked up nearby, still limping from the shot at its knee. It lifted the pipe and swung it down at Kyle's face.

At the last moment, Kyle's left hand shot up and stopped the pipe. A loud metallic clang was heard from the impact, giving the Turian concern. Now Kyle was mad! His teeth clenched and he gripped harder onto the pipe, causing the part he held to crumple and bend. Now the thug was very worried. Kyle stood up, still holding his side, and glared at the ugly Turian. The thug nervously lifted the pipe towards Kyle, backing away a few steps

...and then it collapsed to the ground following the butt of a pistol slamming behind his head. It seems the Quarian hadn't left after all, as she gripped the pistol she had picked off the small thug. She should be running to safety right now, but she simply stood there unable to look away from Kyle. Though he couldn't see past the visor, he could read the Quarian's body language. She seemed confused, worried, amazed and frightened. More so at him than anything that just happened. Was he really that intimidating?

The two of them turned as voices echoed from one of the alleyways. C-Sec! Their eyes met again. The Quarian nodded nervously. He hadn't implied anything with his look, but he got the hint. She dropped the pistol as Kyle ran down the opposite alleyway. His prints wouldn't be found because of his gloves and there wouldn't be any video evidence to ID him. Still, he'd rather not risk sticking around.

He quickly weaved through the alleyways until he saw a good exit. After taking a second to catch his breath, he blended nonchalantly into a crowd heading to the nearest lift. He just needed to get back to the ship. He rubbed his left hand. Hopefully it wasn't damaged from the fight

The M-080's machine gun fired as Kyle and Cpl. Shinjiro bolted away. Kyle could feel the heat of the rounds as they got closer. If God really was out there, he hoped there was some act of divine intervention in store. He then spotted a large wall nearby and dove behind it as the machine gun fire zipped past him. He scrambled to his feet. Something was wrong. He peaked around the wall to see where Shinjiro was.

He didn't have to look for long, as he spotted the Corporal's riddled body sprawled out on the ground several feet behind him. He cursed under his breath. The M-080's gun had stopped, waiting in case he would step into range. Now what? Where was everyone?

"Greenhorn!"

Kyle aimed his submachine gun at the faintly British voice, only to see it was another human. Seems like everyone kept surprising him today. His visor tagged the soldier as Lieutenant David Anderson. Didn't ring a bell. He must be part of a different squad. Still, Kyle was mildly relieved to see someone human alive.

"Sir," Kyle exclaimed, "What happened? Where is everyone?"

"All over the bloody place," Anderson replied, motioning towards the battlefield. Kyle peaked around the wall to see the corpses and debris from the battlefield. Everyone? There was still fighting in

the distance from whoever else was still alive, but it was faint. Several soldier from his own squad were amongst the bodies nearby, along with the remains of the Mantis. The Mgalekgolo bond brothers were in a collapsed mess near the top of the hill, their insides splattered on the ground.

The M-080 rolled forward as a group of Raptors exited from behind it. Two of them kept watch while another tended to a wounded one nearby. Two more came from the entrance Kyle just ran from, with one supporting the other as it walked.

"Things are looking pretty FUBAR, sir!" Kyle said as he turned back to Anderson, removing his helmet.

"Only if you're a pussy!" Anderson replied, removing his own helmet. He was an intimidating black man, yet he had a warmth and determination that was infectious. "These wankers have more firepower, but they aren't ODS'T tough. And we still have our weapons, so we can still kick some ass!"

Kyle smiled. At least the lieutenant was confident in dire situations. He rested his back to the wall as he looked back out. "Any ideas, sir?"

"A few." Anderson motioned to a nearby spot. "See that?"

A lone rocket launcher lay on top of a fallen ODS'T soldier several yards away. Anderson's confidence meant it must still be loaded. Kyle nodded.

Anderson reached for a sniper rifle next to him. "It's not going to be easy. I don't know how many rockets are in there, but hopefully one should be enough if you aim carefully. I'll draw the other sods' attention while you get it."

Kyle gripped his submachine gun. So he was going to run out, get the rocket launcher, position himself in the right spot and hope whatever rockets were left could stop the M-080? He gulped, but tried to remain confident.

"Don't bugger out on me now, soldier," Anderson said. "This is your chance to be a hero. Show these blimey bastards they can't take our planet!"

Kyle nodded nervously as they put their helmets on. "Ooh-rah!" He moved to Anderson's opposite side and positioned himself. It was going to be a good run to get to the launcher, but he had a second wind kicking in...or he tried to convince himself he did.

"Ready?" Anderson said as he adjusted his scope. Kyle nodded. He could do this. He could do this. He kept telling himself he could do thisâ€¦|.

"GO!"

With a push off the wall for extra momentum, Kyle charged for the launcher. He heard the Raptors fire back at him, as they had clearly not missed the lone human sprinting like a madman. Dirt and rocks flew across past his field of view, but he did not falter. A shot then cracked and one of the Raptors cried out. The rest turned their

attention to Anderson's position. Kyle sighed as he hoped Anderson was moving out of cover to escape M-080's retaliation.

Kyle ran until his lungs were on fire, but he finally made it. Prying the dead soldier's hands off of the rocket launcher, while also muttering an apology, he hoisted it over his shoulder and ran towards the M-080. He quickly checked the ammo counter. One rocket left. Damn! This shot better connect.

He eventually reached a good distance and bent onto one knee trying to aim carefully. The M-080 fired its main missile turret at Anderson's wall, blowing it into chunks. He couldn't tell if Anderson was behind it, but he didn't have time to look. Placing his finger on the trigger, he held his breath and fired.

The rocket soared across the hill and slammed into the side of M-080, Fire engulfed the vehicle, catching two Raptors in the impact. Bits of metal flew out and the cockpit windows exploded, revealing the driver. Kyle smiled thinking it had worked.

This was short lived though, as the M-080's turret now directed its attention at him. Shit! It was still in this fight. He dropped the launcher and dove behind a collapsible barricade as the M-080's machine guns fired. Loud denting sounds reverberated across the barricade as Kyle tried thinking of a new course of action. He knew it was only a matter of time before it launched a missile. What could he do now?

"Eat Earth fury!" Anderson's voice echoed as Kyle heard an explosion up the hill. He peeked over for a millisecond to see the remnant of a grenade explosion take out a couple of Raptors. An impulse then kicked in.

He leapt to his feet and ran as the M-080 destroyed the barricade with a missile. There was not a second to waste. Against all rational impulses, he charged directly at the M-080. Some may call it crazy, but right then he felt as invincible as a Spartan. He couldn't explain where this courage came from other than it happened. He mechanically reached down to his belt and pulled out the looted plasma grenade, priming it mid-sprint.

He was close enough now that he could duck and avoid the turret's missile as it shot over his head. With the strength of an Olympic shot-putter, he hurled the plasma grenade into the exposed cockpit. The driver panicked and futilely tried to prying the grenade off as it attached to his face. Kyle bolted and dove to the ground shielding his head.

A loud kaboom echoed all across the hill, causing Kyle to wait a second before he checked his handiwork. The explosion engulfed the cockpit and a good chunk of the M-080. Blue plasma still scorched the now completely useless turret. Kyle smirked as he let his battle fury cool down. This was the kind of stuff medals were given for.

Before he could finish that though, a shot zipped past his ear and struck something to his left. He turned to see a Raptor fall to the ground. Looks like he missed that one. He looked towards the origin of the shot and saw Lieutenant Anderson across the way with his sniper rifle still smoking.

"You lose a few points for not checking your surroundings but that was damn good work overall," Anderson joked over TEAMCOM.

"Well there goes my promotion," Kyle joked back. He hurried to Anderson's position so they could prepare for their next moveâ€|

â€|but then he noticed something behind the lieutenant. A Raptor, with a fresh wound on its leg, unfolded a sniper rifle and took aim at Anderson. Kyle's eyes widened. He didn't take a second to think as he picked up his sprint. "LIEUTENANT!" He shouted. Anderson turned, but Kyle pushed him to the side before the lieutenant could take the hitâ€|

The pain that surged through Kyle's arm was unlike anything he had ever felt before. He had even had his hand burned on a stove once, not his decision, and that was soothing in comparison. The scene played itself in slow motion again in his head. The round from the rifle shooting out. Anderson still stumbling back from the push. Kyle attempting to retract his hand from the push. The bullet entering into his left wrist. His wrist exploding, sending his hand falling onto the floor. Whatever kind of gun was used, it was a hell of a caliber.

Time played back to normal speed as he howled in pain and fell to the ground, holding the fresh stump with his other hand. Blood soaked into his armor and underlay Ashe grit his teeth to suppress the pain.

A shot flew out from Anderson's position and sniper tumbled onto the ground. Kyle couldn't see the lieutenant's kill though, as his pain forced his eyes closed at the moment. Blood continued to run out of the stump, not coagulating fast enough from his applied pressure. Kyle strained, groaned and hyperventilated. "Oh God! Damn it! God! Shit!"

Anderson ran to Kyle and threw his own helmet off. He was trying to keep his cool, though his face showed he understood the severity of the injury. "Nolan! Calm down! We'll get you to the med-bay ASAP! It will be alright! " Anderson began applying medi-gel and bio-foam to coagulate the wound. "There's going to be no dying here! Keep calm! Breathe deeply!" Anderson was doing his best, but it wasn't going to be enough without-

"This is Pelican Four to ground team. Ground team, do you read?"

Anderson looked up. Out in Shanxi's orbit, Alliance and Sanghelli cruisers were taking on the Raptor fleet. The Admiral had arrived with the rest of the Second Fleet! Pelican drop ships, Kodiak shuttles and ODST drop pods were exiting orbit to the planet's surface. Anderson pressed onto his TEAMCOM earpiece. "This is Lieutenant Anderson. We have numerous casualties and wounded. Requesting immediate medical support."

"Roger that. Heading to your coordinates."

Kyle turned to his side as ODST drop pods crashed down around them. Soldiers popped out, chattering and barking orders over TEAMCOM to

secure the area. He could hear the Pelicans arriving right behind them. Anderson helped Nolan onto his feet and helped him up the nearest Pelican's loading ramp. He would be leaving the battlefield soon. His first time in a fight and he had to quit early. He looked down at the stump againâ€|

â€|

It had been a long trip back to the dock and the slow elevators wasn't helping. They moved like molasses on their best days, so having to use three of them already was grating in Kyle's nerves. It was another item on his list of reasons he didn't live on the Citadel.

He removed the glove on his left hand, revealing the synthetic hand underneath. He had inspected the last time he was on the Citadel, but since that scrap with the Turian thugs it had felt off for some reason. He didn't have time to repair it now though. He'd have to do his best in the ship's garage.

In all fairness, he could have had a hand cloned to replace the lost one. That was how soldiers usually overcame missing limbs. He never gave that option a second thought though. No matter what hand would be stuck onto his arm, it wouldn't be his hand. As far as he was concerned, his hand was still on Shanxi. He may as well have a hand made of metal instead of someone else's.

He tested the fingers individually. They all responded like usual. Then he tested multiple fingers at a time. They were fine. Then he tested the wrist base. All seemed to work fine. So why did it feel off?

The scene from Shanxi repeated itself in his mind again. The memory was always in slow motion, emphasizing every little detail. The shot was still as loud as he remembered. The pain was still as intense. The frustration was still as obnoxious and enraging. And the sight of his severed hand a few feet away, still in the position it was when he pushed Anderson out of the way. Still fresh with bloodâ€|

He then realized his synthetic hand had been tightly curled in a fist. The stress was causing his injured side to act up too. He needed to calm down. He didn't want to go through the therapy sessions again. He wasn't angry anymoreâ€|right? He had targeted the problem. He had talked out his frustrations. He should be fineâ€|

â€|but he just bludgeoned three Turians in an alleyway. It was in self-defense! He threw the first punch though. It was to protect the Quarian, right? Could he have talked it over peacefully? Didâ€|?

He stopped. Thinking too hard was how he got in trouble last time. He tried to empty his mind by focusing on the news playing through the elevator's speakers.

"â€|In other news, three people were hospitalized following a vicious fight in the Citadel's lower wards."

Kyle's eyes shot open. Shit! The news now had his full attention.

"The victims claimed an Alliance marine attacked the group 'unprovoked' while they were engaged in a business deal. However, contradictory claims from an eyewitness, along with lack of evidence, hold the assailant's identity and motives in doubt. Alliance officials are willing to cooperate with C-Sec should the claims prove valid. The victims are also being questioned, based on the eyewitness' testimony suspecting links to criminal activities on the Citadel. C-Sec will continue to investigate the situation, encouraging the Council to increase surveillance for the lower wards to prevent these incidents. Coming up next, elevator maintenance continues in theâ€¦"

Kyle sighed. Looks like the Quarian had his back for now. He couldn't count on things working out nicely every time though. He needed to think ahead next time. Make sure that if he ever beat up a few Turian bastards againâ€¦

The elevator came to a stop. He exited and proceeded to his assigned ship, the _SSV Tokyo_. She was a pretty sturdy cruiser, at least from what he had gathered serving on it. He slid his glove back on, rubbed his injured side with one hand and made his way through the ship's airlock.

After what felt like an eternity of decontamination, he was back on the ship. All he needed was a quick trip to the med bay, then to the garage and then he could get some restâ€¦

"2nd Lieutenant."

Kyle turned sharply. Standing there was his superior officer, dressed in his Alliance blues officer uniform. Though the years had worn down some of his more rugged features and accent, he was still the same leader Kyle had followed for so many years.

"Captain Anderson," Kyle raised his hand in salute as he calmed his nerves.

"At ease," Anderson replied. He lowered his salute as Anderson smiled. "Enjoy your shore leave?"

"As much as you can on the Citadel. It's not quite Earth."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you'll get your chance soon. Heard from your family lately?"

"Bits and pieces. You know, 'Oh the kids are doing great' or 'Mom and dad just got back from a trip to Harvest.' Things are pretty uncomplicated for them."

"If only it were for all of us." Anderson wiped something off his shoulder and turned back to Kyle. "Something on your mind?"

Kyle still wasn't as good at hiding his emotions from Anderson as he thought. He rubbed his arm and averted his gaze.

"I've just beenâ€¦thinkingâ€¦"

"Same thing?"

"Yeah."

Anderson crossed his arms. "You told me everything was fine."

"It is. I'm a lot better. I justâ€|wellâ€|" Kyle lifted his left hand. "It's easy to remember things."

"War brings a lot of tragedy, Kyle. Everyone loses something when they fight. Some more than others."

Kyle looked down to the ground. He anticipated another lecture. Anderson had become a lot softer and sage-like since the First Contact War, despite whatever military presence he still carried.

"I'm not going to lecture you," Anderson replied, probably sensing Kyle's displeasure. "You kept a lid on it for so long that it was going to come out again. I still trust you. And I know you can still do your job. So do what you need to so you can get a handle on this again. We need you in top form for whatever comes next. Understood?"

There were a few seconds of silence as Kyle mulled this over. Anderson was the only person he knew that could make him feel like this. Not even the other leaders had this kind ofâ€|hold, for lack of a better word. And worse, it was a hold that required no coercion or intimidation. Both men respected each other for their respective skills and as much as he could list his own skills, he always knew Anderson was the superior soldier and leader. And that is what made Anderson's hold so powerful.

"Sir yes sir," Kyle said with a nod.

Anderson smiled. "You're a good man, Kyle. I'm glad to have you around." He respectfully patted Kyle's shoulder. "We'll be leaving the dock shortly, so make sure you have everything set."

Kyle began to walk away until he heard Anderson from behind.

"Oh," Anderson added, "And I hope you went easy on them."

Kyle turned sharply back at Anderson. "Uhâ€|sorry?"

"Resolme and Jenson. Sounds like you cleaned their pockets."

Kyle chuckled, relieved it wasn't anything else. "Ohâ€|haha! Uh, yeah, they're just being drama queens. They didn't even put down that much compared to me. You know how Greenhorns are. Got to knock them down a peg so they can grow."

"I've had plenty of experience to understand that. Just don't abuse the mentoring privilege. Too much tough love can still break a private."

"Right sir."

"Dismissed, Lt. Nolan."

Kyle nodded back and walked down the ship's bridge. Wellâ€|he dodged a bullet there. He wasn't quite in the mood to be grilled again, though he wouldn't put it past Anderson to have pieced together who

attacked those Turians. He didn't though, so Kyle was in the clear. Right now, all he wanted to do was get off the Citadel. Surely whatever happened out in space with other humans surrounding him would be preferable to just waiting around hereâ€¦

â€¦

****Codex Entry (Alliance): Orbital Drop Shock Troopers-History****

_The unit originated during the Martian campaign against the Neo-Communist Koslovics, when the 105__th__ infantry successfully deployed from Mars' orbit to support United Nations forces. The title 'Orbital Drop Shock Trooper' was officially established following additional successful drops in the Rain Forest Wars and the Jovian Moons campaign. However, the ODST's involvement in Earth military affairs diminished following these wars as focus diverted to more pressing issues like overpopulation and famine._

The outer colony Insurrection in 2490 was a turning point in rejuvenating interest in the unit's combat capabilities. ODST squads were deployed on regular high-risk operations to sabotage Insurrectionist suppliers and assist UNSC forces in joint assaults. The dawn of the Human-Covenant war put an end to this, diverting the ODST's attention to engaging Covenant ground forces in full-scale combat. Though casualties were high, the ODST valiantly fought in every major campaign from Harvest to the final Battle of the Ark. To this day, ODST headquarters preserves a memorial for the many soldiers who gave their lives to ensure peace amongst the 314 races.

The discovery of the Mass Relays and expansion into Citadel space only furthered the ODST's reputation. Following the occupation of the human colony Shanxi, they were amongst the first humans to engage in direct combat with Turian soldiers. From liberating cities to clearing vital enemy positions, the ODST held their own against the Turian military for the entirety of the 'First Contact War.' Their acts of heroism and sacrifice serve as a rallying cry for future ODST recruitment, as well as an unfortunate political tool for anti-alien activists like the Terra Firma party.

Following the First Contact War, security and protection became new ODST priorities as the Alliance increased its colonization efforts and built connections with the Citadel races. From counter-terrorism operations to colonial reconnaissance, ODST involvement within the Alliance has taken on a multi-faceted role. ODST squads are regularly rotated amongst Alliance cruisers to boost efficiency and morale. They have also proved invaluable in field-testing new technologies, leading to many weapons, armor and vehicles becoming standard in the Alliance military. However, direct action has remained their primary focus and selling point.

Further information on Orbital Drop Shock Trooper history not classified by the Office of Naval Intelligence can be found through the extranet and numerous war museums within the Forerunner cluster.

****...****

****And with that, the first two chapters of Last of an Ancient Breed**

are complete. Thank you so much for your time. Please feel free to review and critique the story as you please, either through the review section or PMs. I am pretty open to suggestions for improvement and corrections if any need to be addressed. Let me know what you think of these chapters, Kyle as a character or whatever else is on your mind about this story.**

As well, remember to check out the source story, **The Last Spartan****, here:**

** s/5939286/1/The-Last-Spartan**

3. Exhuming the Hushed Casket (Part 1)

My sincerest apologies for the lateness of these two chapters. I had a lot on my plate lately, including finals at my college, girlfriend stuff, family and completely rewriting huge chunks of these chapters. I am ready to post now though.

One quick note first. Through some study of the Alliance's military rankings, I realized Ralston's rank in the previous chapters was too high. So I have retconned it from major to lieutenant so it works better for the rest of the story.

Once again, a huge thanks to DinoJake for all the work he does. If you are not reading **The Last Spartan****, ****DigiDorks****, or any of his other work, check it out.**

I also would love to put out a few plugs of my own. For one, I have just started a new fanfiction story for TellTale's The Walking Dead Game titled **A Life of Service****. The first chapter is up for your viewing pleasure and the second will be posted within the next week.**

And for any and all Academy Award fans or just general writers, I co-administrate a contest called "Bait an Oscar" where you pitch your dream Oscar winning vehicles for monthly competitions. Essentially, it is a simulated Oscar race with your own press section, campaigning and eventual awards given out. The contest is all for fun, so the real prize is the skills learned and the fun involved. Check us out on our site at Weebly (use your search engine to find it easier).

** And with all of that done, here is the continuing adventure of Kyle Nolan and now his squad of ODS soldiers. This chapter will overlap Chapters 2 and 3 from ****The Last Spartan****, offering a second viewpoint on the events that happened. It will be fun!**

...

0942 Hours, February 14, 2683

SSV Tokyo

Patrolling the Hourglass Nebula

...

Private Devon Resolme felt everyone's eyes on him as he moved into an attack stance. The young Filipino focused down the firing range for anything out of the ordinary. He took a deep breath and straightened his posture. He was probably taking this too seriously, but that's just what happens when you're the new guy. Every move you make either proves your worth or makes you the joke of the mess hall.

His hand moved slowly to the folded M-3 Predator pistol at his side. A bead of sweat slid to his eye. Ok, he was getting way too into this. The lieutenant said that you needed to be ready for an attack at any moment. The fact there wasn't even a target up yet meant that they were toying with him now. That's what he gets for being the last one up. He had to be ready if-

The target popped up. He panicked, but did his best to recover. He quickly grabbed his pistol and unfolded it. Two seconds already gone. Make the next second count! He quickly aimed from the hip and fired.

A buzzer sounded and a flashing red light lit the holographic dummy's crotch, eliciting large laughter from the dozen soldiers surrounding him. Resolme groaned. He was trying to aim for the head!

"Points for creativity, Private."

Resolme turned to see 2nd Lt. Kyle Nolan, the squad's leader, move from the wall he was leaning on. He waited for the corrections about his posture or whatever to begin.

Instead, the lieutenant turned to the squad. "Yeah, really funny, Remind me; how many of you guys actually HIT the target?"

The laughter died down a bit. Resolme smiled. He was just happy the lieutenant had his back. It probably wouldn't last, but even a moment was comfortingâ€|

...

Kyle knew that would shut them up. Nothing silenced an ODST soldier more than pointing out their flaws and the Alliance soldiers with them had no excuse. Sure, Resolme clearly panic jumped and his aim was wildly off, but actually hitting the target was to be commended. He knew Resolme had shown a lot of talent for being a greenhorn, so he hadâ€|conveniently planned this part of their daily training on the firing range. He also purposely delayed popping the holographic dummy to test the private. At least he now knew if anything, Resolme could "disable" certain enemies before finishing them off.

"That's what I thought," Kyle addressed the soldiers. "I'm standing with some of the best soldiers the Alliance has put through the meat grinder, ODST and standard marine alike. And an FNG can quick draw better than all of you."

Then, a soldier from the ship's marine detachment spoke out. "Sir, what's the point of all of this?"

Kyle turned to the soldier. "Pardon?"

"Well, do we really need to practice this? I'm not sure how efficient a trick like this is in combat. We're not cowboys." A few of the

other soldiers nodded and mumbled in agreement.

Kyle crossed his arms and smirked. "That we are not. You're absolutely right. I was wondering why there was a significant lack of tumble weeds and busty saloon babes. No offense to the ladies here."

Some of the men chuckled at the remark.

"Let me ask you all something though," he continued, "How much time does it take for one stray bullet to pierce your skull?"

The men were quiet. Not because they didn't know, but because it was obviously a rhetorical question. He made a zero with his fingers.

"That much. We're so spoiled with our cutting edge kinetic barriers that we forget there is only so much punishment they can take. Think they'll do any good against a trainer sniper with a Widow or Mantis? The shit they will!"

He unfolded his Razer pistol and twirled it around cowboy style. He loved doing that. "Time can make all of the difference on a battlefield. One second can determine if you get a medal or a body bag as your reward. You need to be faster than your opponent with any gun, even a pistol."

He folded the pistol again and activated his omni-tool. "It's about focus. It's about patience. It's about knowing that at any moment, you have to be ready to--"

He pressed a button on the omni-tool. Another holographic dummy popped up on the range.

"-STRIKE!"

Within a second, he whipped around, unfolded his pistol and fired from the hip. A red light flashed between the dummy's eyes. He could hear small gasps of awe from a couple soldiers, including Resolme. He twirled the gun back to its slot and made another zero with his hand.

"That much!"

This wasn't meant to be a shaming moment. It was to make a point. He should reinforce that just in case though.

"You're enemy may be fast. He may be strong. He may be accurate. You know what you all are though? Faster, stronger and more accurate!"

He twirled his pistol again, this time bouncing it off his good hand, catching it with his synthetic hand and twirling faster. Ok, now he was showing off, but hopefully he was still making the point. "We don't have Spartans or superheroes helping us here. There are no mods or engineering tricks to make you good soldiers. All we have is good old-fashioned human ingenuity, strength and reflexes. I don't care if you're using a Revenant, a Volkov, a Tornado or a damn Carnifex. You WILL be proficient with any gun, even if it means shooting someone between the eyes from your hip. You're the best the Alliance has to

offer. Show them that."

He waved a hand to the firing instructor, who had been waiting patiently on the sidelines. "Ok, my two cents are done. Continue please." As the soldiers went back to the practice, he approached Resolme and spoke in a hushed voice. "Don't think I'm letting you off the hook. Three seconds is way too long to pull out a pistol. I expect at least a chest hit next time." Resolme nodded as he rejoined the group.

The instructor led the men through the typical firing and basic training procedures. Kyle returned to his previous spot and observed. He enjoyed being a fly on the wall from time to time. It allowed him to observe qualities of his squadmates he wouldn't be able to otherwise. The ODSI prides itself with combat diversity and it was his job to keep an eye for who was good with what. He felt he had a pretty good team at the moment, Resolme included.

Over on the far side of the range was Corporal Tu'uta Tangilanu, a soldier from the Pacific island of Tonga. Most of the Tongans Kyle had met were pretty one in the same, being physically intimidating and jovial to a fault. However, even for the leanest Tongans, Tangilanu was particularly unremarkable physically. He was, however, a skilled technician and Kyle made sure to take full advantage of that. He could pop a few heads with his shotgun when needed too.

A little further down was Sergeant Julianne Engelbrektsson, the squad's biotic support. Biotics were still a bit of an oddity, since Humans have not had them nearly as long as the Asari, Krogan or the other Council races. However, being able to throw up biotic shields and fling people like rag dolls proved a nifty skill for ODSI recruits. Engelbrektsson had enough opportunities to show that off for Kyle to be impressed. Her name was still a mouthful to say though.

Then there was Corporal Jared La Rosa, a soldier from Peru. La Rosa had served in the squad for a while and Kyle had noticed the young man's skill with long-range weaponry early on. He then introduced La Rosa to a sniper rifle and the rest was history. Now La Rosa was equally talented at shooting small targets from a distance as he was shooting off his mouth.

And then there was Operations Chief Asha Beckett, a British born Sri Lankan soldier. Beckett had served alongside Kyle the longest out of the group, making it a no-brainer to name her his second in command. She was a very driven soldier, good at following and executing orders. However, she was also a good person to ask for a second opinion should he ever need it. To be honest, he didn't need it that often.

As he continued to watch the practice, his TEAMCOM earpiece sounded off. "Bridge to Lt. Nolan."

He put two fingers to the earpiece. "Nolan here. Basic exercises are going well."

"Good to hear," the man over the earpiece replied, "The XO wants to talk to you in the Comm Room."

Kyle's curiosity was aroused. Normally they would just speak to him through the earpiece. It must be important. "Alright. I'll be there ASAP."

"I'll let him know. Over and out."

He stood up from the wall and faced the squad. "Good work, everyone. Finish up your routines and return to your posts."

"Sir yes sir!" The squad replied in unison. Kyle exited the range and made his way to the elevator. He nodded to the requisitions officer as he pressed the button to the upper floor.

As the elevator slowlyâ€¦ever so slowlyâ€¦made its way up, he thought about everyone at the practice. They were good soldiers. He hoped they would be the best soldiers someday. Maybe he was a little harsh with the showing off and lecturing though. Everyone started as a greenhorn. Heck, he was hardly one to talk. Twenty years in the service and he was still just a 2nd Lieutenant. Granted, he had foolishly turned down a couple promotions out of some kind of pride. Even so, there were better soldiers who deserved the promotions more.

As the elevator door opened, one of those better soldiers was waiting by the galaxy map. Time had really hit this man with the ugly stick of age, but he was still as intimidating as ever. His graying hair had receded a lot and the wrinkles in his usually tough skin reminded Kyle of the Grand Canyon trenches. He'd never say that to the man's face of course. That guy could still pack a wallop when he needed to. He had been that way ever since Shanxi.

The XO reached out a hand and smiled. "Those kids still misbehaving down there, Nolan?"

Kyle shook the XO's hand and chuckled. "No more than usual, Ralston."

Staff Commander Dominic Ralston was an inspirational story for the ODS. Although his squad suffered numerous casualties in the first wave of Shanxi, he rallied the rest of his troops to trump the Turians and push their lines back in key skirmishes. Kyle would have been a part of all of that if he hadn't been transferred to Anderson's squad early into the war. Still, he was happy for the XO. Like Anderson, Ralston had ascended the ranks to represent to ODS in high places. And he was a damn good example to follow for that.

Ralston motioned Kyle to follow him. "Seriously, how're they all doing?"

"Exceptionally well. Did you expect anything less?"

"Nope. If someone I trained is teaching them, that's exactly what should happen."

They passed through a few auxiliary rooms as they entered the main hallway. "Did the bridge say anything specific before you came up?" Ralston inquired.

Kyle shook his head. "No sir. They just said you wanted to speak to

me."

"Good," the XO replied. Ralston's demeanor wasâ€|strange. Kyle couldn't quite put a finger on it. He didn't think Ralston truly knew what it was either. They entered into the Comm Room and took seats from the chairs circling the room.

"Alright, this should be quiet enough." Ralston said, trying to act more comfortable.

Kyle shifted in his seat. "â€|am I in trouble?"

Ralston chuckled. "I would have yelled at you already if you were."

Ok, so Kyle could rule that out. "Is Anderson joining us?"

Ralston shook his head. "He's working on a few things in his quarters. There'sâ€|a development happening." He leaned forward. "Alright, I should probably be a little less vague. Fleet Command wants us to regroup with the Fifth Fleet immediately."

"Okâ€|" Kyle replied as he cleared his throat, "Where are we headed to?"

"The Ismar Frontier."

Kyle raised an eyebrow. "Uhâ€|no offense, but what's so important that they need the whole Fifth Fleet present? There's nothing out there but a few crap planets."

Ralston placed his hands on his lap. "I'd say that any other day too. However, Fleet Command got wind of something from a Turian exploration vessel. Apparently they found a derelict Human ship floating around one of the planets."

A human ship wandering about the Ismar Frontier? Well that was weird, especially that the Turians would want to report it at all. Still, it didn't seem that urgent. "I didn't know any of our ships were patrolling the Ismar Frontier," Kyle inquired.

"They weren'tâ€|" Kyle waited as Ralston paused before continuing. "It's a UNSC frigate."

That caught Kyle's attention. He figured they had salvaged all the ships from the war. The Covenant had struck the outer colonies pretty quickly during the initial stages. Perhaps they pursued a ship through slipspace to a remote part of the galaxy or it was a straggler from an unreported attack. Whatever the case, the Alliance was surely excited to find a relic like that still intact.

"Thought I should let you know," Ralston continued. "We're short on exact details so we're keeping things on a need to know basis. We'll brief everyone once things are clearer, but I want to be ready regardless. The Alliance will want a full examination when we arrive to...'exhume' any sensitive information."

Kyle nodded. The last thing they needed was Batarian or Jiralhanae raiders looting their confidential military records.

"Glad you understand," Ralston continued. "We've already set course for the nearest mass relay. Meet me tomorrow so we can discuss this further." Ralston sat up. "Dismissed, lieutenant."

Kyle saluted the XO and left. An antique UNSC ship randomly floating in the Ismar Frontier and the entire Fifth Fleet was going to collect it? Guess it wasn't very often that a piece of history comes knocking at your doorstepâ€|

â€|

After a couple days of travel, the Tokyo arrived at the Ismar Frontier with the rest of the Fifth Fleet. The brass wasted no time locking down the system. Patrols were established to keep watch for unwanted visitors, with some positioned around the mass relay for good measure. Other ships were ordered for more menial tasks, like scanning the nearby planets and scouting unexplored regions of the Frontier. The Tokyo, however, was at the heart of the scene as it parked within range of the derelict ship alongside several other Alliance vessels.

Kyle noticed a few Turian ships were allowed to join in the affairs, along with the exploration vessel that found the ship. He figured it was a political move to not take away the Turian's credit for the discovery. Still, this was a human matter. He would have personally told them to get lost if he had the authority. He didn't though.

Captain Anderson had left in a Kodiak shuttle fifteen minutes earlier to meet Admiral Hackett on the Fleet's flagship, the Mt. Everest. Things were still on a need to know basis, which was hard considering everyone on the crew really felt a need to know. Ralston had promised to make things clearer when they had more information. The fact he hadn't yet was starting to concern people.

So for now, Kyle waited with his squad in the mess hall as they finished their breakfast. Most of the ship's work had been delegated to the main crew, so they had more leeway to prepare for whatever the brass wanted. He used the time to explain what details Ralston had authorized him to share.

"For real?" Tangilanu exclaimed quietly. "UNSC?"

"Honest to God," Kyle replied back, holding his hand up in mock solemnity.

"Do they know which one it is yet?" Engelbrektsson inquired.

Kyle shook his head. "The captain went over to survey the wreckage. They'll let us know soon enough."

Tangilanu was beaming. "Wowâ€|this is a part of our history floating out there. You know my grandfather fought in the war, right?"

"I'm pretty sure everyone's did," La Rosa interjected. "But yes, I don't think anyone has forgotten how grandpa Tangilanu tangled with the Covvies with his bare hands."

"Ha. Go ahead and tease," Tangilanu replied back. "Still, I'm pretty sure most of the ships lost in the war were accounted for."

"Lost or destroyed?" Beckett asked.

"Well technically the Covenant destroyed every ship they came across so it's irrelevant. Still, most of the ships were tracked through UNSC databases for ID's and service records to make sure anyone involved could find it. It's not likely they would 'misplace' a ship so easily."

"It could be such an obvious answer that you're overlooking it," Beckett replied.

"I'd like to think I know what I'm talking about."

"What, you some kind of Human-Covenant War buff?" Engelbrektsson asked.

Tangilanu shrugged. "It's hard not to be when every possible story from the war has been posted on the Extranet. Who knows though? Maybe there's something I'm missing. Were there any battles fought out this far?"

"The Frontier wasn't even discovered by that time," La Rosa answered. "So no, it's highly doubtful."

Resolme sat next to La Rosa right then with his breakfast fresh from the dispenser. "What's doubtful?"

"Your aim," La Rosa jokingly teased, to Resolme's chagrin. "No seriously, we're trying to figure out which ship it is out there."

Resolme shrugged. "Does it really matter? It's one of our ships. Whatever is on it should make us happy."

"Oh?" Englebrektsson raised an eyebrow. "Well, what do you think is on it then?"

"Wellâ€¦I mean..uhâ€¦" Resolme shrugged. "I dunno, maybe there are some MIA's ID tags to find or some other stuff."

"Of course," La Rosa replied with deadpan, "Because the brass would send the entire Fifth Fleet to retrieve ID tags."

Resolme shrugged again. "I'm just saying."

Kyle finished the remainder of his meal. "No matter what is or isn't on the ship, I want everyone ready for whatever the brass asks of us."

"Is there much to be ready for, sir?" Tangilanu replied. "It's probably just a bunch of old weapons and tech."

"Life has a way of hiding all kinds of secrets," Kyle replied. "That ship's been out there forâ€¦what, a hundred and thirty years? Anything could have clung onto it in that time."

"Yeah," La Rosa piped in, "Like some unknown parasitic alien that lays eggs in our bodies. Or maybe some Jiralhanae pirate is using it to deposit his vast booty of space gold."

The squad chuckled.

"Ok, maybe not ANYTHING," Kyle corrected himself. "Still, if they called the whole fleet in, there's got to be something special abo-"

"Nolan!"

Ralston's voice piped over Kyle's earpiece. He moved his fingers to it, drawing the squad's attention. "Nolan here."

"Come to the bridge immediately. Ralston out." Wellâ€|that was brief. Which means Kyle should do what the XO said.

"I'll be back." Kyle said to the squad before quickly running up the stairs. It would be faster than riding the elevator and it was only a floor up.

Ralston waited by one of the terminals next to the galaxy map as Kyle entered the bridge. He waved Kyle over and turned back to the terminal. "The lieutenant's here, sir."

"Excellent," Captain Anderson's voice spoke through the terminal. "Kyle, we've just scouted the ship. It'sâ€|well, you should see for yourself."

Kyle studied over the images Anderson sent through the terminal. The ship wasâ€|definitely a war relic. It had been cut in half by something beyond his guess. Various parts and equipment floated in a slow orbit around the ship. The paint was still intact and displaying the old UNSC colors in all their glory. Other than the other Kodiaks and fighters surveying the wreckage, it didn't seem like anything unusualâ€|

â€|until he noticed the name printed on the ship's side. His eyes widened. Ralston's did too. So the answer was so obvious Tangilanu couldn't figure it out. Mostly because no one expected to ever find the remains for this particular ship.

They had found the _Forward Unto Dawn_!

"Get a team ready and meet us on the _Mt. Everest_. Anderson out."

Ralston turned to Kyle, still wide-eyed in disbelief. He nodded and raced down the stairs as he spoke into his earpiece.

"Beckett, get everyone geared up now!"

â€|.

Kyle quietly sat in his seat on the Kodiak as they traveled to the _Forward Unto Dawn_. The last hour had been chaotic. News spread quickly of the ship's identity and the whole fleet was in a strange mixture of excited and somber. This was not just a scavenging mission for UNSC tech and documents anymore. It was a search for something even more important.

Everyone knew what the deal was. For many, the _Forward Unto Dawn_

was a symbol of Humanity's victory during the Human-Covenant War. It was one of the ships that fought alongside the newly allied Sanghelli in the Battle of the Ark against the Prophet of Truth's forces. Following the Prophet's defeat, the Forward Unto Dawn was the last ship to travel back through the slipspace portal to Earth. Unfortunately, only half of the ship made it through the jump, with the Sanghelli's Arbiter as the sole occupant. Whatever was left of the ship was either lost in slipspace or floating adrift with the remnants of Truth's fleet. This was a tragic loss, particularly because of who was stuck on the other half of the ship.

Maybe now they could finally give the Master Chief a real hero's burial.

Anderson had wasted no time organizing search parties from all the available soldiers in the fleet. He wanted a thorough search conducted for any trace of the Chief's corpse. Kyle's squad had been split up to help diversify the search, but he still had Resolme, Beckett and Englebrektsson with him. Anderson had also chosen Private Peter Wallis, Gunnery Chief Gisele Trover and Corporal Timothy Michaels from the Tokyo's marine detachment to accompany them. It seemed like a good group to at least talk to during the search.

No one was feeling talkative though. It wasn't a particularly celebratory thing they were doing. The Spartans, not just Master Chief, were heroes. Some would argue that if wasn't for them, Humanity would only be a memory today. And now they were going to help bury the most famous Spartan of them all.

Most of them sat awkwardly in their seats or stood around. Kyle wanted to say something to perk them up. He looked over to Beckett, who nodded in agreement to his unspoken concern.

As he opened his mouth, Englebrektsson broke the silence. "You knowâ€¦I wouldn't have been born if it wasn't for the Spartans."

The squad turned to her as she spoke. "My great-grandparents lived on one of the outer colonies when the Covenant invaded. My great-grandfather served in the colony's militia and was helping the rest of his squad evacuate civilians. Several platoons of Kig-Yar and Sanghelli broke through the defenses and fired at them. The whole situation was a mess. He remembered seeing plasma melt limbs off people as they ran and militiamen being cut down in the crossfire."

She pointed to her side. "A stray Covenant Carbine shot hit him here and he fell to the ground. His vision faded and his insides screamed in pain. All he could think about was getting up to help the last few civilians escape before he died. Then he saw these twoâ€¦giants come out of nowhere and charge the Covenant headlong. He had never seen the Covenant retreat before, but he understood why. He used to say the Spartans were like Terminators. They had no fear in battle, they moved with mechanical precision and they could take punishment that would kill most people. He was convinced until the day he died that they really WERE robots."

She slumped forward. "Anyway, the Spartans held the Covenant off long enough for some soldiers to pull him away and patch him up. The last thing he saw before he passed out was the Spartans standing triumphant over a bunch of Covvie corpses. He always wished he had a

chance to thank themâ€¦|."

The group went silent again. It was an inspiring story. Resolme then spoke up. "The Master Chief..." He was struggling to find the right words. Kyle didn't blame him. "He deserved better than this."

Kyle looked up to the group. "Hey. We're helping Humaity's greatest hero receive a proper burial. Isn't that something to be proud of? Once we find his body, we'll get back to Earth, he'll be buried with honors, there'll be a huge party and people will be happy. It's sad now, but it's a miracle to even have this moment."

"How do we know he's even in there?"

Everyone turned sharply to Beckett. She seemed uncomfortable to suddenly be the center of attention, but she continued. "Not to be a downer, but it's possible that he never made it back to the ship. You all know the stories, so it's not like I'm talking crazy. All anyone had to go off of was the Arbiter's testimony. We could be going into an empty search."

The group thought about it momentarily before Kyle crossed his arms and stared at Beckett. "Then we'll still hold a memorial, with or without a body."

No one dared to speak against that.

"Approaching the Forward Unto Dawn in one minute," The Kodiak's pilot spoke through the intercom.

They all looked out the windows to see the ship fill their view. Kyle was still amazed at how cleanly the slipspace jump had cut the Dawn's hull. Here's hoping they wouldn't find the Chief like that. He signaled everyone to put their helmets on as they landed in an exposed room.

The door slid open and Kyle jumped out first. He waited for his magnetic boots to adjust to the new surface as the rest of the squad also landed. Zero-G was not his forte, but he had gotten used to it over time. As the magnetization finished, he pulled out his prototype M-96 Mattock and shone the gun's flashlight into the darkened room. The Forward Unto Dawn was eerie, like a ghost from an age long past. There were little indication of electricity anywhere, save for a few independently running systems and machines. Additional flashlights shone across the room, signaling that his group was ready.

As they approached the door leading out, he motioned them to do a breach formation. It's not like they expected to find anything dangerous, but one could never be too cautious. With all the mysteries in the galaxy, La Rosa's alien parasites theory could be just as plausible as anything else.

Englebrektsson and Resolme took point as the rest of the squad waited behind them. Kyle gave the go-ahead and the two burst into the room with their guns raised. Trover and Wallis moved to the unoccupied spots by the doorway as they waited for the all clear. Nolan watched their flashlights scan the area thoroughly.

"Yep. Still empty," Englebrektsson cracked through the TEAMCOM. The

rest of the squad proceeded inside. "You expecting some Jirhalenae pirates to jump out?"

"Not anymore," Nolan replied half-kidding.

"All teams, check in." Anderson's voice sounded through the TEAMCOM.

"Team Bravo, standing by," Kyle replied through the channel. He waited as the other five teams checked in.

"Roger that." Anderson continued. "We're starting now." The channel closed.

Kyle turned to the squad. "Alright, you heard the man," he said tapping into his omni-tool and setting up his HUD to register squadmate status and map markers. "Englebrektsson, take Resolme, Trover and Wallis with you down that way." He pointed to their left. "The rest of us will search the other side. Don't stray too far, don't do anything stupid and don't get too misty eyed over all of this. Immediately report anything you find to me."

He closed his omni-tool. "Sound good?" The squad nodded. "Let's roll."

And so the search began. Kyle took the lead for his group down their side. He was still impressed how intact everything was. Aside from the loose parts here and there, the ship looked like it was fresh from the shipyards.

"Whoa! Look at this," Michaels said grabbing a rifle floating in the air. He held it up to show the others. "My God—this is a BR55HB SR Battle Rifle. They stopped making these decades ago." He folded his own gun and held the rifle in both hands. "It's never been fired."

"Pretty neat, Corporal." Kyle replied as they continued ahead.

"Feels like I'm walking in a museum!"

For the next forty or so minutes, Kyle and his team scoured their section of the ship. He marveled at how—archaic UNSC architecture was. Everything seemed a lot rougher in design, built to be sturdy rather than efficient. There were more corners, rough edges and blocky designs than you'd find on any Alliance ship. Tangilanu was probably freaking out over how inferior this all was. Still, this was what passed for cutting edge military hardware. If they hadn't started with this, none of their current tech would be around.

Michaels bypassed a locked door and led them into what appeared to be the crew quarters. The bunks were lined along the walls, with the rock hard mattresses still wedged inside the frames. Personal items and trinkets floated around the room. Kyle could only imagine how this could have been home for some poor marine stuck out in the traverse.

"Corporal!" Beckett snapped at Michaels as he reached out for several floating personal items.

"Sorry," Michaels apologized as he retracted his hand. "It's tempting."

Kyle rolled his eyes as he opened a TEAMCOM channel to the other team leaders. "Tell me someone's found something."

"Negative."

"No."

"Not yet."

"Uh-uh."

"Nope."

He closed the channel and led the team forward. He expected this to go quicker with all these marines at different parts of ship. Yet here they were still searching. He checked his HUD to see the rest of the squad still moving about on the opposite side. Maybe Beckett was right. Maybe they wouldn'tâ€

"Sir." Beckett opened a private channel with Kyle over the TEAMCOM. Well, that was weirdly coincidental.

"Yeah?"

"Back on the Kodiak. I'mâ€|sorry if I spoke out of line."

He sighed. "No. It's fine. Itâ€|it probably needed to be said."

"I do hope we find him."

"We all do, Asha."

"Yeahâ€|but I just can't stop thinking about it. Maybe the Chief was caught in one of those rooms where the ship was sliced and was sucked out of an oxygen vacuum. For all we know, his corpse is in some unknown quadrant floating by itself."

"Wellâ€|" He thought about it for a second. "Spartans are said to be lucky."

"As you've said many times before."

"Because it's true. I don't know how much that luck can last, but he did survive the entire Human-Covenant War. That has to say something."

The group exited the room. "Wellâ€|then maybe we're not thinking like a Spartan."

Kyle raised an eyebrow inside his helmet. "Huh?"

"Yeah. I mean, we're searching all these crew quarters and auxiliary rooms. Maybe the Chief died in one of them, but I doubt that he would just keel over like that."

She had a good point. They entered into another hall as he turned back to her. "He probably knew the layout of these ships. What would be the first place HE would go to?"

"Well, one of the teams has probably checked the comm room and I doubt he made it to the hangar." She paused for a beat. "If he expected rescue to arrive, it's possible he's-"

"Hey guys!"

The two of them turned to Michaels, who waved a hand to get their attention.

"I was just thinking," Michaels continued. "Why don't we try the cryo room?"

There was an awkward pause. Then Kyle nodded. "Uhâ€¦yeah. Good thinking, Corporal."

"I know, right! I figured the Master Chief was probably waiting for rescue, so what better place to wait?"

Kyle checked through his TEAMCOM. "Englebrektsson, have you guys found a cryo chamber anywhere?"

"No sir. You think the Chief is there?"

"Maybe. Keep your eyes peeled."

"Yes sir!"

Kyle closed the channel. "Lead the way, Corporal." Michaels had a bounce in his step at that order.

Beckett groaned into the private channel. "I thought of the cryo chamber first!"

"I know. We'll say you did in the report."

The search continued for another fifteen minutes as they kept a sharp eye out for any indication of a cryo room. So far, the search yielded nothing.

Kyle eyed his HUD and saw Englebrektsson's group getting closer to them. As they exited through another hallway, he waved them down to regroup. Englebrektsson, Resolme and Wallis lowered their flashlights.

"Anything?" Kyle inquired. Englebrektsson shook her head. Kyle sighed. "Alright, I'll let the other team leaders know we're looking for it."

As he opened a channel, a voice called over the TEAMCOM. "Hey! Over here!" Trover called out.

The group double-timed to Trover's position. The soldier was noticeably jittery as Kyle approached her. "What happened?"

"Look!" Trover flashed her light to a stairway nearby. Large white letters were on the wall with arrows indicating their destination.

Whatever the other words said was not important as Kyle spotted the thing they were looking for: CRYO CHAMBER.

He smiled under his helmet as he reached an arm out and gave a quick hug around Trover's waist. "You are beautiful." He waved everyone over. "Down here!"

The squad quickly followed him as they went down the stairs to the lower floor. Their flashlights scoured the area as they excitedly searched. It was so close they couldâ€

"There!" Michaels pointed to an entrance to their right. CRYO CHAMBER was written along the top. They found it!

The squad entered into the chamber. The place was calm compared to everything they saw so far and pretty spacious too. The color tone was lighter, due to a few lights and gadgets that had a bit of juice left. Cryo pods lined the bottom of the walls around the squad, save for a few detached ones. It hadn't experienced a lot of damage at all.

The main focus of their attention was in the center of the back wall though. Engelbrektsson moved a few of the floating pods with her biotics as they approached what appeared to be a still active pod. Frost from the cold covered the windows, blocking their view of the inside.

Kyle signaled the group to wait and moved to the window. Moment of truth! He wiped away some of the frost with his hand and shone his flashlight insideâ€

â€And his jaw dropped. Laying motionless in the pod was a large green armored soldier with a yellow visor. Kyle knew all the stories about the Spartans, but he never imagined he would ever see a real one in his lifetime. The rest of the squad crowded behind him and peered in. A couple muffled gasps of surprise.

"Wow!" Michaels exclaimed in quiet excitement.

"The legend himself," Wallis said.

"You're seeing this too, right?" Resolme asked Trover.

"He's soâ€tall," Englebrektsson pointed out.

Kyle opened the TEAMCOM channel for Anderson and the team leaders. He looked down at the Chief. He seemedâ€peaceful. Kyle figured that Chief's vitals went out a while ago and he passed away in his sleep. No pain, no agony and no suffering. There were too many horror stories for the dead heroes of the Human-Covenant War. It was nice to know that the greatest hero went quietly into the night.

"This is Team Bravo. You reading me, Team Echo?"

"Team Echo here, go ahead." Anderson replied back.

Kyle turned to the group and beamed. "I think we've found him, guys. We've found the Chief."

**Codex Entry (Alliance):** Forward Unto Dawn - History

A Charon-class light frigate of the United Nations Space Command's navy, the Forward Unto Dawn was assigned to the Home Fleet when the Covenant invaded Earth. It survived the initial wave of the attack and was made the remaining fleet's flagship under command of Fleet Admiral Terrence Hood. During the Battle of Tsavo, it was discovered that the Prophet of Truth was using a Forerunner Dreadnaught to excavate an ancient artifact buried under the region's surface. Admiral Hood led the Dawn and several cruisers to destroy the Dreadnaught, but the attack proved ineffective. Truth's forces activated the artifact and entered the slipspace portal it had opened.

Admiral Hood's forces then learned of Truth's intent to use a device called The Ark on the other side of the portal, believed to be some form of super-weapon. Under his authorization, Commander Miranda Keyes, Spartan 117 "Master Chief" and the Halsey AI Cortana took charge of the Dawn and led a UNSC Task Force, alongside the Sanghelli Separatist Fleet of Retribution, into the portal to engage Truth's fleet. The Dawn provided manpower and heavy weaponry needed to defeat Truth's ground forces stationed on The Ark.

Following the death of Commander Keyes and The Prophet of Truth, the remaining crew was evacuated while the Master Chief and the Sanghelli Arbiter prepped The Ark for termination. Sergeant Avery Johnson, who gave his life fighting the remaining Covenant forces, stationed the Dawn for extraction as the two heroes escaped. However, the portal to Earth collapsed on the Dawn as it fled, trapping the Master Chief and Cortana in the Ark's detonation. The two of them, along with any remaining crew, have been listed as missing in action with the remainder of the Dawn.

_The section of the Dawn that returned _with the Arbiter _to Earth is currently on display at Earth's War History Museum._

â€|

****On to Part 2!****

4. Exhuming the Hushed Casket (Part 2)

**** So now we have found The Master Chief. What happens next? Let's find out, shall we?****

â€|

No one wasted a second once Michaels set the coordinates. One by one, the teams found their way to the chamber, each wanting a look into the Chief's pod. It felt like some kind of worship, with every person taking a turn to bow to the idol. Kyle understood the excitement. He already had a chance to diffuse the shock, but for everyone else this was fresh. It was a discovery as big as the Prothean ruins on Mars, only more personal.

At some point, La Rosa and Tangilanu finally rounded the corner to meet back with their squad. The thing that caught Kyle's attention though was the large duffel bag of stuff slung over Tangilanu's shoulder. He could make out the shape of rifle barrels poking out on one side. He stared down Tangilanu.

"What?" Tangilanu defended himself. "We found the armory."

"It's not like the Alliance won't have fifty extra copies of those guns to salvage," La Rosa added eyeing the guns.

Kyle held in a sigh and motioned them into the chamber. He'd deal with their looting later. Right now, they had bigger things to worry about.

Anderson's group then rounded the corner from a nearby hall. Kyle was about to greet him tooâ€|until he saw what was behind him. Following Anderson's group was a squad of Turian marines!

Kyle reached out and grabbed Anderson's shoulder, quickly brushing past the Turians. He opened up a private channel. "Geez! Who invited them?"

"I did," Anderson replied without missing a beat.

"What? Why?"

"They found the ship, Kyle. And they volunteered to find the Chief. I'm not turning away the people responsible for this moment."

"Butâ€" "

"There's no 'but' to discuss. I expect you to play nice. Otherwise, you can wait outside," Anderson said as he closed the channel and followed the Turians into the chamber. Kyle grumbled. Anderson was doing this just to bug himâ€|.right? Whatever the case, Anderson held the cards. He took a calming breath and returned to the chamber. Looks like he would have to "play nice."

There was still enough room for people to walk about, but most everyone kept their distance from the pod. Anderson led one of the Turians to the pod as Michaels worked on the pod's controls. Kyle could practically hear Tangilanu's thoughts of jealousy that Michaels was picked for the job. To be fair, Michaels was the better technician.

Kyle found his group close by the scene and quickly rejoined them. At least they were a good distance from the Turians.

"By the Spiritsâ€|" The Turian with Anderson exclaimed. "â€|when you said he was a super-soldier, you sure weren't kidding. He's the size of a Krogan."

"He's not just bigger," Anderson added, "But he's also stronger and faster than the average human."

"And if you believe some stories, luckier," La Rosa chimed in from behind them. Tangilanu nudged his side to shut him up. Strangely, La Rosa sounded genuinely serious. Perhaps being in the presence of a hero softens your ability to tell jokes.

Anderson and the Turian continued to discuss about the Chief as La Rosa opened a private channel with the team. "Soâ€|.congrats guys..." He sounded bummed that Tangilanu and him weren't there for the

discovery.

"Hey," Kyle replied, "The history books never remember the details for events like this. They just know that a squad of Alliance soldiers found the pod. Whose to say you weren't there?"

"Yeah," Englebrektsson joined in. "If you're really nice, the lieutenant will say you thought of looking for the chamber first."

"I already called that one," Beckett replied. "So how about we say were with him when you checked the pod?"

Kyle chuckled. "Sure, why not? I'll say you held the flashlight when I confirmed it."

"â€|sweet!" La Rosa said sounding more pleased.

"Yeah, that's cool. I don't need any credit, guys," Tangilanu said sarcastically.

"Ah don't be greedy," La Rosa joked, "I already decided you were the one who saw that the pod was active."

"Heh!" Tangilanu laughed with a deep Tongan laugh. "Alright then."

Kyle smiled. At least they were all willing to pat each other on the back for stuff he did.

"Alright. Let's see if we can't unhook this pod. It's time this hero came home." Anderson said, which got everyone's attention. "Michaels, think you can do it?"

Michaels nodded to Anderson. "Sure." He activated his omni-tool. "The ship's systems aren't based on Prothean tech, but they ARE very primitive."

Every second Michaels spent tapping felt like an eternity. Tangilanu groaned into the private channel. "How hard is it to check a cryo pod?"

"It's over a hundred years old, bro," La Rosa replied. "An omni-tool can only do so much. It's like trying to fit a square block into a circular peg."

"Yeah, yeah. A better technician couldâ€|"

"Shut up, guys!" Resolme suddenly said. The private had been laser focused on the scene this whole time, which surprised everyone when he finally spoke up. Everyone stopped talking...

â€|at least for a few seconds. Out of the corner of Kyle's visor, he could see Tangilanu looking at something nearby. He turned to the squad. "Hey guys! Iâ€|"

Resolme gave him a sharp stare. Rather than continue, Tangilanu moved to a terminal and examined it curiously.

"Need to find the what?" Anderson asked Michaels.

Michaels shook his head and tapped at his tool again. "That can't be rightâ€¦..Holy crapâ€¦"

Kyle could hear whispering amongst the crowd, but all he could focus on was what Michaels meant by that.

"What? Is something wrong?" Anderson asked concerned.

"Uhâ€¦I think that depends on what your definition of 'wrong' is, sir." Michaels looked up from his tool. Everyone else's eyes fell upon Michaels, waiting for an answer.

And then he dropped the bomb.

"He's still alive."

If sound could be heard in the vacuum of space, Kyle would have heard a pin drop. No one even breathed as they let that sink in.

"What do you mean alive?" Anderson asked.

"According to my omni-tool, all the Chief's vital signs are still good." Michaels said holding up his arm.

Anderson went to check. Kyle's private channel perked up again. "God in heavenâ€¦" Resolme said exasperated.

"I know. Seriouslyâ€¦" Beckett said struggling to find the right words to reply.

Kyle didn't know what to say either. Alive? The Chief was still alive? How? Even at the peak of cryo technology, it couldn't preserve anyone for THAT long! The hushed whispers of the other soldiers continued to echo around the room as he pondered this.

"Guys...guys!" Tangilanu then spoke in a hushed but urgent whisper. Kyle could tell he wasn't pleased at being ignored with what he wanted to sayâ€¦

â€¦so Tangilanu instead bypassed the chain of command. "Sir, I've found something."

Anderson and everyone else diverted their attention to him. "What is it?" Anderson said surprised.

"It's a data terminal of some kind," Tangilanu said pointing to the device.

Anderson hurried over as Tangilanu ran diagnostics on the terminal. "Can you get anything from it?"

"Maybeâ€¦" Tangilanu replied tapping away at the terminal. He was struggling a little, which made Kyle smirked. So it wasn't as easy as Tangilanu thought. "Okay, I'm in. Let's see what we got hereâ€¦"

As he pressed one more button, blue light materialized from the top of the terminal. Tangilanu and Anderson backed up as the light reconfigured into the shape of a holographic woman. Kyle took one

look at the woman and then it hit him. If people were stunned by the Chief's discovery, then they were about to be equally stunned at whom this was.

"Oh good. Rescue," the woman said cheerfully. No one dared say a word. This day kept getting more surreal with each new reveal. The holographic woman was concerned by the silence. "What?"

Anderson and Tangilanu looked to each other, then back at the woman. Anderson took a step forward while Tangilanu took a step back to the squad.

"Are you Cortana?" Anderson inquired.

The woman smiled and puffed her chest out formal style. "UNSC Artificial Intelligence serial number CTN 0452-9. At your service."

"Did the hologram just say she was an AI?" Resolme commented over the TEAMCOM.

"You're hearing is top notch, Resolme." La Rosa replied.

"No way!" Englebrektsson said with some glee. "Lieutenant, what do you think?"

Kyle was too distracted to respond. If this thing was an AI, the Council was going to have a fit. Part of the treaty the humans agreed to after the First Contact War was that they would give up the two most "potentially dangerous" tools in their arsenal: Slipspace and AI's. He could see some reason for banning Slipspace, even if it was an irrational one. AI's were a different story. It stemmed from something about how they were not trusted because they were an imitation of intelligence and life. Also, apparently there had been some issue with sentient AI's going all sci-fi movie on their creators a few hundred years ago!

This was something different though. This was THE AI people remembered from the war. Cortana was as famous as the Chief. Surely they could make some case to keep her under Alliance care like they did with the old AI's.

"Don't sugar-coat it. How long?" Cortana addressed to Anderson hesitantly.

"To put it bluntly, well over a century," Anderson replied.

"A hundred and thirty one years, to be exact," Michaels added.

Cortana seemed very surprised by the news for at least a second. She then quickly calmed down and turned to the Spartan's pod. "Is Chief alright?" She asked concerned

"According to my tech expert, his life signs are stable," Anderson answered.

The AI sighed relieved...and then said what everyone else was thinking.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Wake him up."

Everyone's eyes fell on Anderson as they waited for a response. Turns out, it was a typically political response.

"Erâ€¦wellâ€¦"

"Weeeelllll?" Cortana said clearly not amused.

And here Kyle didn't expect the Turian to come in and get Anderson's back. But he did. "We came on board this ship looking for the Chief's _remains_. We thought that after over a century in cryo-sleep, he'd be dead. While it's nice to see he's notâ€¦it complicates things a little."

Kyle wasn't exactly sure how it was too complicated. Sure, they would have to manage the publicity that would follow the discovery. And acclimatize the Chief to modern times. And explain Cortana's existence to the Council. Andâ€¦ok, so it was maybe more complicated than he thought.

Anderson then passed through the crowd as he mentioned something about contacting his superior. So, Hackett had the final say on the situation. All they could do was wait. Well, that and talk to Cortana.

Cortana examined the Turian who spoke to her. "Soâ€¦new aliens, huh? Not Covenant, I hope."

"No," the Turian replied. "Not Covenant. We're called Turians. Officially, we're allies of humanity."

"And unofficially?"

"Wellâ€¦"the Turian stumbled. "There's always some degree of tension in inter-species affairs. Some are more severe than others."

"You don't know the half of it," Cortana relied. Kyle smiled at her comment. She was good in his books so far.

Cortana continued to interrogâ€¦inquire about the Turians until Anderson returned from his chitchat with the brass. He approached Cortana. "I've just gone over it with my superior, Admiral Hackett. And he seems to be all for the idea." He then turned to Michaels. "Wake him up."

Michaels was surprised by this. "What, you mean right here, right now?"

"No time like the present," Anderson replied.

"About time," Cortana said happily.

More hushed whispers were heard as Michaels prepared to open the chamber and Anderson continued to talk to Cortana. Kyle wished someone was recording this moment through their video feed. This was something that should be shown in history vids down the line.

"Something wrong, Michaels," Anderson asked as the technician paused.

Michaels took a deep breath and nervously laughed. "I just realizedâ€|we're brining back the greatest hero in Human history. We're MAKING history right now. Iâ€|I need a moment to take this in."

"We haven't got all day. Sometime in the NEXT a hundred and thirty one years would be nice, thank you." Cortana said speaking Kyle's mind at that moment.

"Right, right. Sorry." Michaels apologized and continued the process. "Okay. I don't have a drumroll, so a countdown will have to do. Cracking open the pod in 3â€|2â€|1â€|."

And then he pressed one last buttonâ€|
â€|.

The ride on the Kodiak back to the _Mt. Everest_ was one of the longest Kyle could remember. He took off his helmet and wiped his brow quickly. He knew it was a nervous sweat, but he couldn't help it. Beckett, Anderson, Tangilanu and him were all sharing the same shuttle with the freshly awoken Spartan.

He knew it was rude to stare at the Chief, but his eyes wouldn't move. This was him. THE legend in the flesh! Inexplicable to science or technology, he had been preserved for a hundred and thirty one years in full health. And Kyle was sitting right across from him.

The Chief looked at Kyle's armor and nodded towards something on his suit.

He checked nervously, spotting the insignia of the ODST corp.

"ODST?" The Chief inquired

He nodded.

"Glad to see some things stayed the same," the Chief replied. And that was the only thing said for the rest of the ride.

The Kodiak arrived at the _Mt. Everest's_ _hangar and the side door slid open. Anderson and the Spartan exited first, with the rest following behind. Everyone in the hangar was staring at the group. Kyle felt less pressure knowing the stares were for the Chief, but it was still awkward.

Anderson turned to Kyle. "I'll take the Chief to meet the admiral. Make sure Ralston knows we'll be leaving soon."

"What now?" Kyle responded confused.

"We said we were bringing the Chief home. That means all of us. Hackett's mobilizing the Fleet ASAP."

"Ohâ€|.uh, yes sir."

Before Anderson went back to the Chief, he added one more thing. "Oh,

and I think it would be good for all of you to stick around on the _Mt. Everest_. The Admiral wants to speak with all the marines involved."

Kyle nodded and Anderson led the Chief to the hangar's exit. After more hushed silence, people started talking again and resuming their work. He moved back to his squad, who were all busy discussing what just happened.

"So you guys found the armory?" Englebrektsson said to La Rosa.

"Well, it clearly saw better days but yeah. I'm telling you, Tangilanu's head was spinning when he saw all that old crap."

"It's not crap!" Tangilanu interrupted. "That stuff is mint condition authentic UNSC weaponry. Do you know what someone would pay for something like that?"

"You're not seriously selling that stuff are you?" Englebrektsson said nodding to the duffle bag.

"No way. That's going back to my family's collection. I just need a way to safely send it to Nuku'alofa. I don't trust some Kig'Yar at a post office to keep their fingers off this."

"There may be a solution to that," Kyle joined in. "We're heading back to Earth."

And that was yet another bit of good news for the squad's exciting day.

"For real?" Beckett said surprised.

"Yup. Anderson wants everyone to stick around so the Chief makes it to Earth in one piece. Nothing better than having the Alliance's best fleet as an escort."

"Whoa!" Tangilanu was elated. "Man, I can't wait to tell my family about finding-"

"No," Kyle said stopping Tangilanu's thought. He then rephrased himself. "We can let people back on Earth know that we are coming, but I'm sure Anderson a hundred percent does not want the Chief's existence getting out yet."

"What?" La Rosa complained. "Why wouldn't-?"

"Let the lieutenant talk," Beckett interrupted.

"Thank you, Asha." Kyle continued. "The Chief just woke up from the largest nap the galaxy's ever seen. Everything's new to him. Can you imagine how strange that feels? Now add all of us gawking at him on the ship."

"You were doing that too," Tangilanu added.

"And I'm not excusing myself. So, I think the last thing the Chief needs is a whole galaxy swarming around him with admiration, fancy gadgets and new ways of living. Just think of it like finding a guy

on a desert island. We'll give him some time to adjust. Understood?"

The squad hesitated for a moment, but everyone nodded.

"Good." Kyle said straightening himself up and putting his hands on his hips. "Still, I hope someone recorded all of that. I doubt the Alliance will allow us to access the helmet feeds and it's not like we'll ever have a day like this again."

"Actually"

Everyone turned to Resolme as he took off his helmet and removed a small device on the side. He held it out for everyone to see. It was a detachable mini camera! "No one said we couldn't record it, so"

That's why Resolme was so focused the whole time!

"No way!" Beckett said surprised.

"Excellent!" Tangilanu added.

"Look at the greenhorn go!" La Rosa said patting Resolme on the back.

Kyle reached out and closed Resolme's hand around the camera. "Don't let anyone see that! You want Anderson or Hackett to ride our asses for this?"

Resolme was surprised until Kyle checked to see if anyone was listening and added, "Make copies for us." Everyone nodded excitedly. At least they would have something to watch on their way to Earth

The next few days were interesting. The only thing people talked about were the Chief, the War and going back to Earth. It was understandable. It's not often you get to make history.

The hardest thing for people to do was not stare at the Chief as he walked around the ship. He was particularly mobile for experiencing such culture shock. Other marines would gossip about how he spent his first day examining all the different parts of the ship. He didn't really talk to anyone, but just having him around excited anyone nearby him.

Kyle was just trying to enjoy being on the _Mt. Everest_ for this long. The Fleet had begun traveling to Earth by the time everything was sorted out and the brass had everyone from the search party brought aboard. The process was pretty painless. Most of it was Hackett and Anderson discussing the event, the implications of it and how they were going to handle things once they arrived. They also took some time to pull aside Kyle and the soldiers who personally found the Chief for additional questioning and testimonies. They just wanted additional facts on top of having them agree to a non-disclosure for the more sensitive details. All strictly political.

Kyle didn't let that bother him. Even while being away from the _Tokyo_ and Ralston, he treated their time on the _Mt. Everest_ like any other day. That's how the ODSI does things.

The squad lingered around the firing range as they finished their morning exercises. No one else was around, so they had freedom to do things their own way. Tangilanu tinkered with a few weapon mods for his Firestorm shotgun. Beckett did some basic push-ups and exercises. La Rosa tested a variety of sniper rifles and Englebrektsson practiced her L3 implant biotics for shield strength and throwing speed. This gave Kyle and Resolme time to work on the private's aim.

"Ok, like I said. Take a deep breath, keep your eyes focused for the target and don't jump," Kyle said to Resolme as he approached the firing instructor. He was used to walking all over the firing instructor on the _Tokyo_, but this guy was more assertive. They had a chance to talk and had managed to work out a good rapport for the training exercises. "Give him two this time," he told the instructor.

The instructor raised two holographic dummies for Resolme. Without missing a beat, Resolme unfolded his pistol and fired at the two targets. The first one he hit in the chest, just a bit off from the heart. The second one, though, he caught right through the nose. A killing shot!

Kyle gave a light clap. "Very good!" He said as Resolme smiled contently. "A lot can change the calmer you are. Practice that a few more times and you'll be a regular Clint Eastwood."

"Can't I be Lee Van Cleef instead?" Resolme joked back.

"No. Eastwood shot him dead before he could even aim, so you want to be Eastwood."

As Resolme positioned himself again, Kyle's earpiece sounded off. "Nolan." It was Anderson.

Kyle put his fingers to his earpiece. "Nolan here. How can I help?"

"The Chief wants to use the firing range for practice. Think you can clear a spot?"

Practice, huh? Looks like the Chief was adapting well enough. "Sure thing. Nolan out." Kyle said and moved to the center of the room. "Alright everyone. The VIP is coming in for a visit. Let's give him some space."

The group shifted to the farther half of the room. Not that the Chief needed a whole lot of space, but they weren't expecting the Chief to be the only one coming in. Kyle could see that the firing instructor was way too excited for the Chief's arrival. He wasn't surprised since he everyone would want to help the Chief practice 27th century weaponry.

To his surprise, it was just the Chief and Anderson who walked in. Anderson must have some sort of personal repellant to keep the fanboys away. The squad and the instructor saluted as the two of them

entered.

"At ease," Anderson said. The squad resumed their work as Anderson and the Chief talked to the instructor. As Kyle approached Beckett, he saw the instructor ask the Chief to pose for a holo.

"You'd think a celebrity like him would have more of an entourage," Kyle mentioned to Beckett as she did crunches.

"Anderson or the Chief?" She asked smugly between pants.

"Both."

"Well, maybe they took your advice too. Like you said, we have to give the Chief space. Especially with the wholeâ€¦" Beckett trailed off, but Kyle knew what she was about to say. It was only a while ago that Hackett told everyone Cortana had been decommissioned due to rampancy. He still couldn't believe it. Cortana looked fine when they found her. Hard to believe she would deteriorate so quickly. Tangilanu or Michaels could have found a way to help her. Then again, a hundred and thirty one years was a long time to still be around. Well, at least she still existed in their secret video footage.

"It's a bitch, isn't it?" Beckett continued as she strained from her crunches. "Losing the only connection to your former life."

"Yeahâ€¦" Kyle replied. "It really is."

"Tangilanu's been pouting since he heard it. I'm sure he would have loved a 'further study' of her AI core to-"

Kyle half listened as he saw the firing instructor show the Master Chief the basics for their weapons. The Chief seemed pretty chill with everything. Or as much as he could tell from the little body language the Chief communicated.

Beckett finished her crunches stood up behind him. "Hypnotizing, isn't he?"

"Huh?"

"The Chief. You haven't stopped watching him since he entered. You're making me jealous."

Kyle chuckled. "Nah, it's not that. It's justâ€¦" He thought for the right word to say. "â€¦interesting." He should have thought of a better word.

"I understand. We have a man blithely strolling the ship who fought a genocidal alien race, explored parts of the galaxy we never knew existed, saved more lives than the entire fleet combined and won a war that was almost certainly a loss."

"You making him sound even cooler."

"I'm a cool person. We do stuff like that."

"Don't I know it?" He smiled.

"Plus, I don't want to ruin your man crush!"

"You wish!" Kyle teased. "Speaking of, you ever grow up watching those old vids as a kid? You know, the documentaries and recordings of the Spartans."

"All the time. The Spartans were my heroes when I joined the ranks. Who didn't want a chance to become 'Spartan tough'?" She said referring to a phrase coined after the war describing the best of anything. "How about you?"

Kyle shook his head. "My grandfather told me all the stories I needed to hear. Pretty intense stuff!"

Just then, Anderson waved over to him. "Kyle, come over here."

His eyes shot up. He turned to Beckett, who was just as surprised. She pushed him forward lightly. "Well, don't just stand there. The captain asked for you."

Beckett went to help Resolme as Kyle met up with Anderson and the group. "Yes sir?" Kyle inquired.

"We need someone with a hard suit to help" Anderson answered as he motioned him to turn. "Could you turn around please?"

So Kyle was a modeling dummy now? Oh well. He turned his back to the group, hiding any nervousness.

"Alright," the firing instructor continued. "Now, your standard marine hard suit comes with five weapon slots. There's two for a sniper rifle and assault rifle on the shoulders, a shotgun by the lower back and two side arms on the hips. Most marines will pick one sidearm or the other when going into battle, but a few will occasionally deck themselves out with full gear if they're feeling bold. Lieutenant, could you demonstrate unfolding an assault rifle?"

Kyle quickly picked up an Avenger assault rifle on a table nearby and attached it to his right shoulder slot, the gun folding neatly into place. He then demonstrated the proper procedure by grabbing the handle at the end and entering an attack stance as it unfolded in his hands.

"Good," the firing instructor said.

"Seems pretty efficient," the Chief commented.

"It is," Anderson replied. "Kyle and I were around before these hard suits became commonplace, so we know what it's like to lug our weapons two at a time."

"Always good to be reminded how old I am," Kyle joked, but no one laughed. He set the Avenger rifle back down murmuring in his head.

The firing instructor continued. "As you may have noticed, our guns have no ammunition clips. Some time after we discovered mass effect

technology, Alliance engineers found a way to integrate its particle acceleration power into modern weaponry. A self-contained mass effect field could cut a piece of metal the size of a sand grain and shoot it at speeds more lethal than gunpowder. Once it had been ODS field tested..." He quickly paused nodding to Kyle, attempting to toss a bone. "...it became our standard armament type."

"There has to be a catch," the Chief inquired.

"There always is." The instructor replied looking to Kyle again. "Lieutenant."

Kyle unfolded his pistol and showed the heat gauge. "The downside is that it makes the guns damn hot. Shoot it too long and you may as well be firing blanks. You have to let it cool down forâ€|oh, three or four seconds before you can shoot again."

"So you'd emphasize controlled bursts over blind firing?" the Chief asked.

"More or less. I usually go for single or limited burst fire guns myself."

"Want to demonstrate, lieutenant?" Anderson asked Kyle.

"Sure." Kyle said moving to the firing line by the range. He could see his squad pausing whatever they were doing to watch.

The instructor raised two dummies down the range. "Feel free to fire when you'reâ€|"

Before the instructor could finish, Kyle stretched out his arm and fired. A red light flashed between the eyes of each dummy. He twirled the pistol and folded it back to its slot.

"Wellâ€|" the instructor continued after overcoming his surprise. "Evidently, the lieutenant is a crack shot." The Chief picked up a Predator pistol on the table and stepped up to the range. "Feel free to take your time. This may not be what you're-

Before he could finish, the Chief fired the pistol. He also hit the dummies square between the eyes.

Kyle was surprised at the Chief's accuracy as everyone else. His first shots in the new millennium and he had made precise killing shots. Even for a Spartan, that had to be beginner's luck.

The Chief turned to the instructor. "A pistol's a pistol."

"Rightâ€|of course." The instructor replied. "Well then. Shall we try for something a little faster then?"

Anderson started to intervene. "I don't think we need to do that rightâ€|"

"No please. Let's try something faster." Kyle responded, now intrigued to test the Chief's aim further. Anderson wasn't pleased with that remark.

"Might as well," the Chief added.

"Alright then," the instructor continued. He raised three more dummies. "Let's see how fast you can hit those."

Chief aimed and fired in rapid succession. All head shots, all perfectly timed. Kyle was concerned now. The Chief was learning really quickly. Sure, he was a Spartan and one of the best soldiers who ever lived, but no learning curve? Hadn't being frozen for a century stiffen his limbs even a little? Kyle had to practice over and over again to get that many head shots in a row. He crossed his arms and looked down range.

"That's good for now," Anderson said. "We should move--"

"Make it five!" Kyle interrupted.

Anderson was even more annoyed now. The instructor was seemed confused.

"Make it five," Kyle said. "And give me five too. See how well the Chief does against another person." He turned to Anderson and the instructor. "He can do it."

"Ok." The instructor raised five dummies in a row for both Kyle and the Chief. Kyle's squad was now fully focused on the scene. "See how fast you can hit five targets in a row."

Kyle was going to show the Chief how it was done now. He hadn't been beaten in this competition before. He unfolded his pistol and approached the line. The Chief lowered his pistol and the two turned to each other. Ok, it was weird having your competition stare at you when you couldn't tell what their expression was. Unfortunately for the Chief, he wasn't firing from the hip this time. He shouldn't try to one up the Chief, but something in him compelled him to. Call it stupidity, but he was going to prove what an expert quick draw shooter could do.

"Fire when ready," the instructor said.

The two of them turned back to the range and lifted their guns. Kyle mentally counted the targets as he fired headshots at them.

ONE

TWO

THREE

FOUR

"Very good, Chief!"

..that didn't sound like a five. Kyle turned to see what the instructor referred to. All of the Chief's dummies had glowing red spots on their heads. Kyle didn't even get to shoot his last one. He didn't know what to say.

Kyle tried to recompose himself as he turned to the Chief.

"Umâ€¦g-good shooting."

"You too," the Chief replied as he returned back to Anderson and the instructor. Kyle could see Anderson's disapproving look before focusing back on the Chief.

He stood there for a moment, not really sure what to feel. The Chief beat him. He had practiced with this pistol for years now. He was a crack shot. He could beat pretty much anyone at a quick draw on the _Tokyo_. And here, the Chief beat him his first time firing a gun in a hundred years. And he couldn't ask for a rematch.

He moved to the squad. They seemed unsure what to say. He didn't want them to say anything. "Finish up your routines and return to your posts," he mumbled as he left the range.

How much could the Chief have beaten him by? Half a second? A third of a second? It didn't seem possible. He did though. As he mindlessly walked down the hall, all he could think about was that moment. There's not exactly an achievement for having your butt kicked by a living legend at your own gameâ€¦

â€¦

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Each of the five dummies flashed red lights on their foreheads. Kyle stopped the timer on his omni-tool. It was good. He could be faster though. The Chief could do it faster.

It was late, or at least late by the official clock the crew worked on. Most everyone else was either working or sleeping to prepare for their next shift. Not him though. He had all night to practice this. No one else was around to say no. He twirled his pistol and folded it back up. After resetting the timer, he whipped out the pistol again.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Red lights on all the foreheads again. He folded his gun and checked the timer. He wasâ€¦slower this time! What? Was he getting tired? He couldn't be. He had only been doing this for an hour. He reset the timer and whipped the pistol out again.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

Four headshotsâ€¦and a miss! He was stunned. He missed hitting a stationary dummy! How does that even happen? He never missed when he usedâ€¦!

He reset the timer, switched to his synthetic hand and fired again!

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

All headshots and all faster than the previous times. That didn't help at all. He didn't want that hand to be faster! He used his right hand on purpose to prove he didn't need to use his prosthetic! It was cheating! Master Chief didn't need a prosthetic toâ€¦

His synthetic hand started hurting again. "Motherfuâ€¦!" He tossed the pistol to the ground and rubbed the hand. This was stupid. Prosthetics don't hurt. They don't have any nerves for pain!

He leaned next to a wall and groaned. He tried thinking of something to calm him down.

"That's too nice a pistol to just chuck like that."

He jumped to see Beckett with her arms crossed standing by the entrance. She didn't seem angry though. Justâ€¦worried. Ok, maybe a little upset too.

He ignored her and picked up the pistol, folding it back to its slot. He approached the firing range and opened the timer again.

She walked up next to him. "So you're just going to ignore me?"

"Yup," He fired five more rounds and checked his time again.

"You can talk about it, you know."

"There's nothing to talk about. Everything's fine." He drew and fired again.

"What the hell's wrong with you?"

"There is nothing the hell wrong with me. I'm absolutely dandy, thank you ma'am." He reset the time and raised his pistol again.

She grabbed the omni-tool arm and shut the timer off. He was about to lift his hand, but stopped himself. "Don'tâ€¦touchâ€¦that!" He said with a glare of controlled anger.

She stared back at him with matched intensity. They held it like this for a while. It was clear that they could do this all night if given the opportunity. He wasn't angry at her. He just wanted to be left alone. Why did she have to be the better person right now?

He finally broke the glare and groaned to himself as he kicked the Avenger rifle he had set on the floor. Great, he thought, she thinks your just some psycho now.

"So the Chief beat you," she said to break the silence. "You going to cry about it?"

He tried to simmer down to talk to her. "Iâ€¦i-it's not that."

"Then what? What's putting your panties in a wad?"

He turned to her. "I haven't lost a that competition in years."

"So you're just being a sore loser."

"No. Wellâ€¦yes. I meanâ€¦" He wanted to say what he was thinking, but he didn't know how. "I've been shooting targets forâ€¦my whole career. I've used mass effect weapons since they came into production. I've used this gun thousands of times to hit a target. And that's just with my good hand. Yet, the Chief comes in and

'Presto!' He can shoot faster than me with a weaker gun and no practice."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned his back to her. "So what? Is everything I've taught bullshit? If I can't shoot faster than a guy on his first try, what good am I to anyone else?"

She moved behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. "You're NOT a Spartan, Kyle! Hell, you shouldn't be! You're ODST! Toughest soldiers in the Alliance." He remained silent. "You don't need augmentations or genetic modifications to be that good. So the Chief showed you up on his first try? Big deal! You're still faster than anyone else I know and you do it with 'good old-fashioned human ingenuity, strength and reflexes',"

Damn! Now she was quoting his words.

"Yeah it stings, doesn't it?" She said enjoying the chance to wield the sword of irony. "Justâ€¦forget about it. Let the Chief be the superhero. He operates in his own league. You be the best NORMAL quick draw expert out there.

He turned back to her. "Are you satisfied with just being normal?"

"Aren't you? I'd rather have genuine talent than have it be given by someone else."

He sighed. Damn her for being so logical and understanding.

"You know I'm right," she said.

"Yeahâ€¦yeah, I know."

"Good." She gave him a friendly jab to the shoulder. "Now get some sleep. Our shift's starting before you know it."

The two of them started for the entranceâ€¦until he turned back to grab his pistol. "Maybe I can just do one more-"

"Uh-uh! Nope!" She beat him to it and folded it to her side slot. She wrapped an arm around his and led him out. "You're lucky Anderson didn't come too. I know how much you hate that..."

â€¦

Codex Entry (Alliance): The Battle of the Ark

During the Covenant's invasion of Earth, a Forerunner Dreadnaught led by the Prophet of Truth crash-landed in the African region of Tsavo. The ship, accompanied by a Covenant armada, excavated an ancient Forerunner artifact hidden underground for centuries. Truth activated the artifact before UNSC forces could intervene, opening a surprisingly non-lethal Slipspace portal. As his fleet entered it, a CCS-Class Covenant battle cruiser arrived bearing the parasitic life form known as The Flood. Only a timely arrival of the Sangheilli Separatist kept the Flood at bay, but at the cost of glassing the whole of Tsavo.

It was then learned that the Covenant went in search of a

super-weapon called the Ark, believed to have enough power to finish Truth's quest for human extermination. A UNSC Task Force and the Sanghelli Separatist Fleet of Retribution launched a counter-attack through the portal to ensure this wouldn't happen. In the ensuing conflict, Truth's fleet was destroyed and the Prophet himself was slain by the Sanghelli Arbiter._

_The battle was not without casualties. Many marines were killed fighting Truth's ground forces, including the Task Force's Commander Miranda Keyes. The Sanghelli Separatists also lost numerous soldiers and cruisers defeating Truth's fleet. As the remaining forces evacuated the Ark, the UNSC Forward Unto Dawn remained behind with Spartan 117 "Master Chief," the Halsey AI Cortana, the Sanghelli Arbiter and Sergeant Avery Johnson to destroy the weapon. Though they were successful, Sergeant Johnson was killed in action and the portal collapsed before the Chief or Cortana could return home.__ Only the Arbiter returned to relay the story._

Many details of the Ark's nature, how the Flood came to Earth and specifics for the Battle of the Ark remain unknown or classified by the Office of Naval Intelligence.

â€|

There you have it. This part of the story is now done. I hope to have the next section out a lot sooner, so stay tuned. In the meantime though, leave your comments, check out my Walking Dead fanfiction, check out DinoJake's original story or do whatever you please! Thank you so much for all of your support!

5. Some Time Apart (Part 1)

I confess. I have been cheating on Last of an Ancient Breed with my Walking Dead fanfic. It was very alluring and I couldn't resist its advances. That one is going very strong though with six chapters so far, so if you want to see more awesome goodness check out A Life of Service on The Walking Dead tab in the game section. Or check through my profile!

But now I'm backâ€|.from outer spaceâ€|.eh screw it!

So, this may just be one of my most ambitious chapters to date. Remember how the last four chapters have mostly been about Kyle and his perspective? Wellâ€|I decided to peek into some of the other squad mates' thoughts. It is still a work in progress to explore them as characters, but I figured I'd start somewhere to get them going. Sometimes there is no better way to develop than to keep writing!

The one drawback to this ambition? The chapter ended up being FREAKING LONG! Soâ€|to make it easier on the reader, I have broken it up into three parts instead of two. I figured it would help pacing as well. On the plus side too, it makes up for the months I haven't posted in some way. Three chapters for each month without an update! Hehe!

**As always, feedback and suggestions are welcome. And as always, my continued thanks are to be given to DinoJake for his terrific source story The Last Spartan as well as his reviews for my drafts (heaven

knows I would have made several huge mistakes if I didn't have him check my drafts first).**

So let us now commence with this epic tale. In the previous chapters, we retold the Chief's awakening from the perspective of Kyle's squad. Now they are returning to Earth to bring him home. The story will diverge from familiar ground to cover new areas of the universe's lore and the details of Kyle's squad. Hope you enjoy it!

0845 Hours, February 22nd, 2683

SSV Mt. Everest

Orbiting Earth

Sol System, Forerunner Cluster

Earth: the first frontier. The one place Humanity was guaranteed a home no matter what. The place any human was welcomed in spite their background. The place where Humanity started and, preferably not anytime soon, where they will likely end. There's just no other place like it.

Kyle decided to stop his thoughts before they turned into a travelogue. It was hard not to though. Being stuck on a sterile space ship for months on end can make a man nostalgic for good old-fashioned Earth soil. Now he was getting to make up for lost time.

He continued to stare out the room's portside window as the _SSV Mt. Everest_ and the Fifth Fleet made the last leg of their journey. This wasn't the first time he saw the planet from space, but the sight never ceased to amaze him. The oceans were massive and blue, hugging the landmasses like watery blankets. The clouds swirled and spun aimlessly wandering to new places in need of shade. And even though one could see more lights on Earth from space than in any point in history, the greens and browns of the continents were as vivid as ever. Even all the satellites, space stations and cruisers orbiting the planet were a pleasant detail. There wasn't a thing he would change.

He admittedly had lost track of how long he had been there. Part of that was from switching off his comm. link to not ruin the moment. Yet he didn't feel like leaving, even if he did know the time. A soldier needed some "me time" even on a military ship. He was sure his squad could handle their landing duties without him.

It's not like they didn't have enough to do already. The brass had been working them back and forth to prepare for the Master Chief's arrival. Everything down to the port they were landing at was precisely picked to have some emotional or nostalgic weight.

So it was no coincidence that New Mombasa was chosen as the destination. Ever since the end of the Human-Covenant War, it became a symbol of Humanity's survival and endurance ability. The Covenant did their best to destroy it when that Slipspace portal turned the city into a ghost town. A century later, it was more prosperous than ever before and the spaceport was the largest commercial port within the African continent. So yes, it was more than a bit poetic to have

the Chief's first steps home be in the war's most famous city.

There was a catch of course. The Chief would not be with the Fifth Fleet during the arrival. Admiral Hackett and Anderson were giving him a private escort to a smaller terminal while the fleet diverted any unwanted attention. Kyle attributed that to the same reason they gave the Chief space. That didn't leave him and the other marines with a lot of fanfare though. They just did something no one could replicate and all they would get was a traditional greeting.

It was probably for the better. After that little mishap at the firing range, Kyle decided, upon Beckett's suggestion, to tone down the shooting showmanship. She was the only one who saw him at his most frustrated, but he didn't want to raise anyone else's concerns. So he went on like nothing happened. Everyone else in the squad rolled with it, though he couldn't stop feeling paranoid about being judged.

As for the Chief, he hadn't seen much of him. The Chief kept to himself for most of the ride, or so he heard from the crewmen. The Chief ate, he slept, he practiced the weapons, but aside from that not much else. The guy was still adjusting to the new time period, but Kyle was grateful nonetheless. He didn't need to be an ass to a living legend more than he already had.

A few more minutes went by as he continued silently observing the planet. Despite whatever he had felt, he was feeling a nice zen right now. As if his frustrations and problems were inconsequential to the grand scheme of things. It was the closest thing to a spiritual moment he had in months.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Kyle turned to see Anderson enter the room. He was dressed in his Alliance blues and looking rather dapper. Shit! He must have been here too long if Anderson went looking for him. As usual though, Anderson didn't look upset or concerned. He kept that same damn poker face on as he walked over and stared out the window too.

"Sir!" Kyle said quickly saluting.

"You don't have to salute every time, Kyle. We can talk as friends here," Anderson said.

Kyle lowered his hand and uncomfortably crossed his arms as he prepped to leave. "I'm sorry. I didn'tâ€¦I'll get back to-"

"I would have told you to leave already," Anderson said still calm as ever. "I just want to talk."

Kyle sighed and slumped his arms down. Greatâ€¦he 'wanted to talk.' He hadn't seen much of Anderson since the firing range mishap, mostly by choice. He figured he should be the one to initiate the conversation before Anderson just in case.

"Sir, Iâ€¦I'm sorry about the other day. It wasn't right to act like that." He apologized.

"Don't worry about it," Anderson replied casually. "Water under the bridge."

Kyle raised an eyebrow. "That went better than he expected."

"But next time you want to be a show off, pick your battles better," Anderson added. And there was the double-edged sword. Kyle groaned inside as Anderson chuckled. "To be fair, that was some impressive marksmanship."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Even the Chief complemented you. I'd say that's an achievement."

Kyle figured that the Chief's reply was just a courtesy response to his half-assed compliment, but he wouldn't argue semantics. If the Chief did really mean it, well, that's good too.

"How are you feeling, Kyle?" Anderson asked curiously.

"Fine," Kyle answered quickly. Maybe too quickly—he decided to add on to that. "I mean, yeah, I'm fine. Just enjoying the view."

"I understand. For all the space voyages and gallivanting we do, it's nice to be reminded what we're fighting for."

"Amen," Kyle said with a smirk.

"Got any plans for your leave?"

"Yeah. My sister and her family are flying out from North America to visit."

"Just like that?" Anderson asked curiously.

"Yeah. They, uh, have a little extra cash to spare for travel."

"Well, that's good. Your sister must be very excited."

"Not as much as the kids. All they usually see of me is the occasional vid-mail and one or two visits a year if lucky."

"You close to them?"

Kyle shrugged. "Well, I'm the only uncle they got. Guess it's nice to see somebody in the family other than the grandparents."

"Fair enough."

For the next minute, they stood in silence. Something was on Anderson's mind more than just talking about family. Kyle had a few ideas what it was, but he figured Anderson would talk about it when he wanted to.

Which he did right then. "So, did Ralston tell you?"

And that's exactly what Kyle thought it was. Before he had switched off his comm., Ralston had told him the news. He nodded.

"Figured," Anderson said with a sigh and a light shake of his head.

"That man's a real blabbermouth sometimes."

Kyle took a deep breath before speaking again. "When were you going to tell everyone?"

"I already did," Anderson said calmly. "We tried calling your comm., but you didn't answer." Wellâ€|that's what Kyle got for wanting private time. He crossed his arms and looked out the window.

"I wouldn't blame you for being upset," Anderson said. "It was out of my hands."

Sure it was, Kyle thought to himself. It was one thing learning that Anderson was reassigned to a new ship alongside the Master Chief. It was another that he had a choice in who came with him and didn't pick Kyle or his squad.

"I mean it, Kyle," Anderson said. "It's important to keep those you trust close and if it was in my power, I would have."

"So why couldn't you?"

Anderson remained silent before answering. "It's no suicide run."

"Yeahâ€|" Kyle said sarcastically. "Classified. I get it."

"Whatever the brass says goes, Kyle."

"I knowâ€|"

The two of them were silent. Kyle slumped his shoulders a little to ease his tension.

"Sometimes it's hard to accept that we're just cogs in a greater machine," Anderson said. "People think they can swap us out with no fuss or problems. They forget that each part has a way of working together neatly. Misplace one and the machine struggles."

And now Anderson was waxing philosophical, but it was a nice sentiment.

"I'd prefer to have all the parts working at a hundred percent," Anderson added.

Kyle chuckled to himself. "Since when has efficiency ever been on the Alliance's priority list? I'm surprised this hunk of junk is even space worthy."

The two of them shared a light laugh at that. Kyle was still upset, but maybe this would be for the best. Anderson was probably sick of seeing him so often. To be fair, he probably would be too!

"Wellâ€|" he said waffling with a thought. "At least we get to live the life more than most soldiers. You know, boldly go where no man has gone before, chart uncharted territory, meet new people and kill them. Can't get that anywhere else." He was turning the thought more into a joke, but it wasn't intentional.

Anderson chuckled. "It's enough to drive a man

crazy."

"Yeahâ€¦sometimesâ€¦" Kyle said biting back his tongue. The remark wasn't aimed at him, but that didn't stop his mind from registering it that way. He changed the subject. "Think you can handle being with the Chief for that long?" Kyle teased.

"He may be a hundred years older and a few hundred pounds heavier, but he's still a soldier and a good one at that. I doubt I'll have any problems."

"I'm more worried what you'll do to him," Kyle teased. "The Chief doesn't know what kind of hard ass is watching his every move."

Anderson laughed. "You would certainly know."

"Approaching Earth's atmosphere in five," the ship's helmsman said over the intercom. "All hands prepare for landing."

Anderson motioned for Kyle to follow. "Better get back before someone reports you as AWOL." Kyle did so as he switched on his comm.. As they passed a few servicemen heading to their posts, Anderson stopped and turned to Kyle.

"Lieutenant," Anderson said stretching out a hand. "It's been an honor working with you again."

Kyle took this as a sign to be the better man. Or at least better than he had been. Anderson was a good soldier and whatever reason there was for not being assigned together, he was sure it was a legitimate one. They were probably just doing crap runs to start the Chief off before the bigger stuff. Nothing to bring a crack ODSF squad into.

He shook Anderson's hand. "Honor's mine, sir. Maybe the Alliance will change their mind and we'll work together soon."

"Lord knows you'd all be a good addition," Anderson replied as he broke the shake. "As long as you behave yourselves."

Kyle scoffed jokingly. "Don't be too hard on the Chief. Hate to see a living legend reduced to a panicked greenhorn."

"Only one way to find out," Anderson said as he walked down a nearby corridor. "Dismissed, lieutenant." He then rounded a corner and was gone.

Kyle took a moment to realize maybe this wasn't terribly enviable. Anderson was getting a privilege by watching over the Chief and he knew it. Still, it was a privilege that had huge ramifications. Whatever example he set as a captain was what the Chief was going to accept as the example the Alliance set in this century. Kyle wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of any backfiring there!

He switched on his comm. and walked away. He had better things to worry about at the moment.

* * *

><p>Everything after Kyle and Anderson parted went without any hiccups. The Master Chief was given his VIP escort on a private shuttle and the Fifth Fleet landed in the spaceport. After a quick headcount, Kyle and the rest of the crew made their way out of the terminal to the main gate. He knew that there would be the usual crowd waiting outside of family members, journalists and others who come for military shore leaves. It was a tradition, but it was a welcomed tradition.<p>

It was strange to see everyone in their casual military outfits though. Not a single hard suit or weapon in sight, aside from that duffel bag of antiques Tangilanu was holding. The crew all had a few days off while the fleet was being refueled, rearmed and given ship maintenance checks. Kyle didn't know what his family had planned for him, but he was willing to go with the flow. At least he knew that his brother-in-law would put them up in a nice hotel.

He felt a nudge to his side and saw Beckett walk alongside him. "Got to keep my eye on you," she teased.

Kyle chuckled. "I was just practicing. Until further notice, you will be seeing very little of me. I release you from my control."

"Thank God," La Rosa replied sarcastically before turning to Tangilanu. "So yeah, you promised me one of those, remember?"

"I know, I know," Tangilanu said as if La Rosa had reminded him many times. "I got your address on my omni-tool."

"Good!" La Rosa said proudly. "Not like I'm going home anytime soon, but nice to know it'll be waiting for me." He then gave a pat on Engelbrektsson's shoulder. "Got any fun plans while you're out?"

"If it involves being far away from you, then they will be," she deadpaned.

"Ooooh!" La Rosa scoffed feigning a burn on his arm. "The viper's venom doth burn."

To be honest, Kyle figured it would be good to get away for a while. His squad mates were good people, but too much of anyone for a long time could grate on your nerves. Maybe that's why he enjoyed seeing his family when he did. It was easier to appreciate something when you only had it for so long.

The main gate opened and the crew exited to meet the crowd. It was mostly what Kyle expected. There were the family members with signs waiting for their soldiers. There were the news reporters with their floating cameras and extranet bloggers commenting on the moment. There were the police men and spaceport security who seemed to have more people on site than usual. In fact, it seemed there was simply more people than on a usual shore leaves. It was strange, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

He peeked over the crowd to see a local high school band lined up in rows playing a classic UNSC military anthem. That song had become a staple in military events even before the Human-Covenant War, with its thunderous intro and steady rhythm that was stupidly catchy. It was a nice piece, even if the brass section of this band was off.

La Rosa whistled as he saw the crowd. "Next time they should just roll out a red carpet."

"Do they usually do that?" Resolme asked naively.

"Oh all the time!" La Rosa teased. "Didn't you know that ODS'T's are celebrities?"

Just then, the group heard a loud booming voice shout from over the crowd.

"TU'UTA!"

Everyone looked to the source to see a tall Polynesian man push through the crowd. He wore a causal button up shirt that was a size too small to show off his rippling muscles and some halfway decent dress slacks

"TU'UTA! FOTOTEHINA!" The large man said as he ran over and wrapped his arms around Tangilanu, lifting him off the ground in a giant bear hug. "Fuoloa 'e fepulingaki!" Kyle figured that the man was speaking Tongan since he looked like Tangilanu except a head and a half taller. His accent was also much stronger than any accent Tangilanu had.

"M-Mosese" Tangilanu said with concerned surprise as the man set him down. "Mosese, what are you doing here?"

"I was stationed in Acre when I heard your ship was landing in New Mombasa, so I jumped on the first transport I could find," Mosese said barely containing his exuberant excitement.

Kyle was impressed. Acre was up in Ghana, which was still a good distance away from the Mombasa Island. The fact this guy could just leave work like that was impressive.

Mosese wrapped one of his big arms around Tangilanu's shoulders and turned to the squad. "So these are the kaungame'as who helped you find the Master Chief, huh?"

That little remark threw everyone off! Hackett had explicitly told the crew not to discuss the Chief until after the brass made a formal announcement.

"What!" Kyle snapped at Mosese.

"Yeah," Mosese said defending himself. "The news stations announced it yesterday." He noticed everyone's befuddled expressions. "What?"

Kyle turned to the squad with an accusing glare. La Rosa and Englebrektsson shrugged. Beckett shook her head. Tangilanu was still stuck in Mosese's hug, but he didn't appear to know any more than they did.

"Don't look at me," Resolme said with his hands up.

Mosese chuckled. "Wow, you guys really didn't know?" He let go of Tangilanu and pulled out his own omni-tool. "Here, there should be something about it."

After a few taps, a live local news station feed came up. The person spoke some dialect of Afrikaans as the footage followed Hackett, Anderson and the Chief exiting their transport and walking through a huge crowd of humans, Sanghelli. Unggoy and other bystanders. Kyle knew somebody was going to have a very bad day if Hackett found out whoever leaks the news.

"This isn't a publicity stunt right?" Mosese asked gleefully. "That's the real Master Chief?"

Kyle looked to Beckett, who gave a shrug. Well, there was no point hiding it anymore. "Yup, that's him," he confessed.

"And you guys who found him specifically?"

Kyle paused. That was unusually pointed. "Wellâ€¦more or less."

"Whoo!" Mosese shouted and turned to the reporters waving his arm. "Yo, these are the guys who-"

Tangilanu quickly turned him back around. "Mosese! Please!"

"What? Just want everyone to know you guys found him! You guys are heroes!" Mosese defended innocently.

"I know! Justâ€¦not now," Tangilanu said glancing at the group. La Rosa and Resolme attempted to contain their amusement at his discomfort. "Yeah, uh, this is my cousin Mosese."

"Cousin?" Mosese said amused as he gave a hard, friendly slap on Tangilanu's back. "There's no Tongan word for cousin, fototehina. Every Tongan is a brother or sister no matter the relation."

Tangilanu rubbed his back. "Well, by definitionâ€¦ah, forget it."

Kyle would have also sucked some enjoyment from the family reunionâ€¦until he saw some familiar faces in the distance. "Ok, so we'll meet back here tomorrow. Have fun and don't cause any trouble," he said to his group as he rushed out.

As he left, he pat Mosese on the back. "Oh and nice to meet you. Bring him back in one piece!" He chuckled.

And so he left them to their own devices. So it looked like everyone at least had something to do. Most of them would probably make calls to loved ones, party in some strip club, buy any personal items they needed and generally doâ€¦whatever they all did. Hopefully not all at the same time.

Right now though, Kyle had his sights focused on three small children running towards him.

"Uncle Kyle!" The oldest one shouted cheerfully.

He couldn't believe how much older they all looked. Sandra was probably thirteen now and her blond hair looked just like her

mother's. Joseph was definitely ten and his freckled face was just as amusing to look at as before. And little Emma was eight and Kyle could see how her mother was spoiling her with those curly locks they worked on together.

He bent down and wrapped his arms around all three of them. It was a good feeling having them close again.

"We missed you!" Joseph said excitedly.

"How was space?" Emma asked.

"Did you fight any bad guys?" Sandra asked.

"Me too, its good and yes!" Kyle answered all of them with a laugh as he stretched his hand a head above Joseph. "It's been so long. Last time I saw you, you were this big. Are you not eating your vegetables again?"

"You're lying!" Joseph chuckled.

"Me?" Kyle teased as he faked putting a hand on a Bible. "Noooo! Soldier's honor!" He spotted their parents in the back. "Come on! Let's say hi to your mom and dad."

"We say hi to them every day," Sandra said. "You say hi to them."

"I guess I will then, smarty pants," Kyle smiled as he walked over.

He was fortunate enough to have one sister growing up. He was several years older than her, but they got along well regardless. While he followed the tradition of every man in the family serving in the ODS, she went the old fashioned route of being a housewife. And for being such, she had aged gracefully. Her long blond hair draped over her shoulders. Her soft blue eyes looked like shining jewels. Her skin was at a nice tone where it was neither too dark nor too light. And she had the figure of a woman ten years her junior. People used to joke how they didn't even look related, but that was just how the gene pool worked.

He gave her a long embrace. "Good to see you, Kim!"

"You too, Kyle," she said as they broke the embrace and looked over to the crowd of people. "Looks like you guys are super popular for once."

"Well not exactly," the man to her side said as he approached them. "This time they brought a celebrity with them, so people finally found a reason to care." It had taken a while for Kyle to warm up to Kim's husband, but David Walker was a good guy. They met during college and dated for two years before he proposed. Now he was living it up as a successful producer and director for serialized vids. Sounded like a catch to Kyle.

"Aw, knock me down when I'm feeling good about myself," Kyle joked. He knew Hackett would still chew out whoever spilled the beans, but he might as well own it. Not like he had a time machine. The two of them gave a quick friendly embrace as the kids gathered around them.

"Alright, who's hungry?" David said to the kids, who all raised their hands. "Hope you don't mind Korean, Kyle. We've been trying to broaden the kids' palette lately."

"I'd eat anything that's not nutrient paste," Kyle said totally not joking. "Lead the way."

The kids followed David to the rental vehicle as Kim walked beside Kyle.

"You know David's going to talk your ear off about the Chief, right?" She said. "Ever since the news broke out, he's been contesting for exclusive rights to your story. He's hoping to go with a documentary of some kind."

Kyle smiled. Perhaps Resolme's little video recording could be put to use after all. He'd have to clear it with Anderson and the brass though, meaning it wouldn't happen anytime soon.

"I'll make sure we can keep that to a minimum," she added. "Don't want to have the Master Chief dominating our day with you."

"Thanks," Kyle said gratefully. As they approached the rental vehicle, his thoughts went back to his crew. He hadn't really asked what any of them had planned. He just hoped they would use their time wisely.

****Codex Entry: (Humanity and the Systems Alliance) New Mombasa****

Located on the Mombasa Island south of Kenya, New Mombasa rose to prominence after becoming the first "tether city." An orbital elevator was built as an efficient way of lifting heavy ordinances to space without the need for booster rockets. This became the heart of New Mombasa's economy and helped it expand into one of Africa's richest cities.

The city also has the distinction of being a primary target in the Covenant's invasion of Earth. In the course of a day, the city was invaded, occupied and eventually destroyed by a Slipspace rupture. The extensive civilian and military casualties can be found in human archives.

Following the war, the city became a rallying cry for reconstruction. The loss of the orbital elevator gave way to the New Mombasa spaceport, utilizing mass effect technology to become Africa's largest commercial port. Commercial tourism also played a significant role, turning horrific battle scenes into inspiring memorials. The ruins of the orbital elevator, the remains of buildings sucked into the Slipspace rupture, various monuments, museums and the famous Spartan Hill remain iconic representations for the cost of war and the hope for survival._

To learn more about New Mombasa tourism and historical reference, consult your local extranet hubs and Alliance databases.

****And that is the set-up. On to Part 2 to see how most of the members spend their day off!****

6. Some Time Apart (Part 2)

****And now onto the shore leave! This will cover a diversity of topics, particularly with Kyle's sections. Enjoy!****

* * *

><p>01230 Hours, February 22, 2683<p>

New Mombasa Combat Arena, Earth

Sol System, Forerunner Cluster

"One potatoâ€|two potatoâ€|three potatoâ€|four!"

Jared La Rosa smiled as he fired his sniper rifle and struck one of his opponents in the neck. The man fell as three other soldiers nearby fired at La Rosa's position at his base. Time to jet!

He ducked and roadie ran with a shit-eating grin as simulated bullets whizzed over his head. It had been too long since he had been in a combat simulator and luckily New Mombasa had one nearby. It was nowhere near as big or flashy as the ones on Reach or Edmonton, but it was a perfectly functional training ground for teams on off seasons. Thankfully, it was also available on days like today for recreational use. And these punks who challenged him deserved to be put in their place!

"He's over there!" One of the other soldiers shouted.

"Ooooooh!" La Rosa taunted. "I'm quaking in my boots!"

He about faced as they fired towards his direction. Good! He dove behind a wall, rolled into the hallway of a nearby building and ran to the opposite side. He could hear the other soldiers outside scattering about to flank him on multiple angles.

And now for a little stealth action!

He twirled his rifle like a flag and gripped it with the butt facing towards him. A pair of footsteps approached his position. He lifted his rifle back like a club and counted.

"One potatoâ€|.two potatoâ€|."

He spotted the soldier's shadow and grinned as he swung. The rifle slammed into the soldier's helmet, knocking the poor bastard onto his back. With another twirl, he aimed at the soldier's head and fired.

Two down!

As he ran out of the building, he looked back to see the soldier's motionless body disappear in a shimmer of blue light. Thanks to the advances in combat arena technology, players could actually use lethal force and not kill anyone. Once a player received enough critical damage or a killing blow, their armor would lock and a device built into their arena suit would warp them back to their

"home base" or out of the arena. Not that La Rosa would be too bummed if he killed these guys. It just meant he didn't have to hold back.

He rounded a corner and spotted two other soldiers coming towards him. A quick glance to his side revealed a stairway to the second floor of the building. He ran full speed up it as the soldiers fired, his shields shimmering as rounds bounced off them.

"He's heading up the second level!" One soldier shouted out.

"Very astute, Sherlock!" La Rosa taunted again.

"We're gonna kill you, helljumper!" Another soldier said.

La Rosa chuckled. It was cute how they thought they were going to win.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he spotted what he was looking for. A large 'man cannon', essentially a gravity launcher that propelled players across the arena, was at the edge calling his name. The bullets flying behind him were enough motivation to answer the call.

As they reached the top of the stairs, he jumped into the cannon, twisted in mid-air and aimed at the soldier to the right. With a crack, his shot connected where the soldier's right eye would be, sending him rolling down the stairs.

La Rosa timed how long it would take to land as he plotted his next step. He didn't know if the other soldier would follow or not, but they were probably angry enough to try any crazy tactic to catch him off guard. And he still had no idea where the other remaining soldier was so he had to keep a watch. A few seconds later and he landed on the ground with a roll...

â€|just in time to miss a sniper shot. He rushed behind some simulated rocks as another shot ricocheted near his face, blowing simulated dust at him. The guys who designed the arenas have done their best over the years to make the matches feel as real as possible. He still remembered when it was nothing but generic landscapes with just a little polish.

As he put his back to cover, he retraced his steps since the match started. He had already used three shots. He could only use two more if he wanted to win. He could do it. He moved to a crouch and slowly peeked around the corner looking for the sniper. That bitch had to be at that team's base. He fixed his zoom as he scanned both levels of the base. Just a flicker of light from their scope or a poorly timed movement was all he needed.

"He's behind the rocks!" A voice shouted over the intercom.

Shit! Their buddies outside the arena were helping them.

"CHEATERS!" He shouted as he ducked, missing another shot. So they were going to play dirty huh? It wouldn't help them.

Then he heard the roaring of a vehicle engine. The other soldier had found a warthog and was driving right towards him. The fact it wasn't

slowing down cued him to the plan. They were going to ram the warthog into the entrance he came in from hoping to block his escape, forcing him to exit out the side where he was exposed to sniper fire.

They really didn't know whom they were dealing with!

He ran back the way he came in right as the warthog was about to slam into the entrance. With a fluid jump, he dove right under the vehicle as it rode over him and crashed. He turned and aimed the rifle to the driver's side as the soldier jumped out. What luck! The soldier's nuts were right in his line of sight.

One perfect shot later and the soldier was down for the count. La Rosa suddenly felt an impulse and rolled out from under the vehicle as a sniper shot hit his previous spot. Now it was just him and this jackass!

"You can call it quits, you know!" La Rosa shouted to wherever the sniper was. "You wouldn't be any less of a man for doing so!"

"Good thing I'm not a man then!" A distinctly black female voice shouted back.

"Don't touch me!" He admitted. "But you're still going down!" He calculated how far away she was based on her shout. She hadn't left the base, but she was moving. She wanted to lure him into the base to sneak attack him.

"One minute remaining!" A voice shouted over the intercom. Shoot! He was going to have to take the bait. He bolted from behind the warthog towards her base. He quick scanned the front of the building. No sign of her. At least not yet.

He arrived at the entrance and put his back against the left side with his rifle raised. He counted to three in his head before peeking around the corner. No one there. He had to keep his guard up. He entered in breach style with his rifle and switched on his light.

It was dark and it was too quiet. He knew she was setting a trap. He just had to think faster than her. He slowed his steps as he listened carefully. She was nearby. He could feel it. He thought of the possible places she could be hiding. As he reached the center of the bottom level, he looked up to the open ceiling leading from the second level. She wasn't there. Then where?

By the time he figured it out, she was already behind him. He quickly spun around, grabbed the barrel of her rifle and lifted it above him as she fired. She tried to stealth snipe him from right behind the head. Clever girl!

Before he could react, she kned his rifle out from his hands. It landed on the ground as he grabbed her rifle with both hands and slammed her against the wall. He would have pummeled her to critical damage right there, but he had to keep within the bet. He pulled at her rifle trying to take it from her, which was tougher than he thought. She was strong!

He twirled the gun out from her hand and tried to aim it. However, a kick to his chest caused the rifle to fly out to the ground. He took a badly timed moment to catch his breath as she wrapped her arms

around his neck. Though he technically couldn't be choked to death, his arena suit could register prolonged pressure around his neck as such. He shook around and flailed his fists behind him to no avail. His shields were decreasing rapidly.

He moved the two of them back and forth, slamming into walls and trying to roll out of her grip. She continued to hold on though, countering his moves. Shit! It would require something pretty tricky to get out of this.

Then he thought of something.

He allowed her to forward slam into a nearby wall. Before he hit it though, he stuck a leg out and shifted their momentum. He hoped this worked! He used both legs to walk up the wall and positioned both hands onto her shoulders as he slipped himself out of her arms. With sheer luck, he flipped himself over her and pushed her into the wall. His landing was less than graceful though, as he met the floor face first.

He quickly grabbed the nearest rifle he could find. It was hers, but he didn't care. Right as she turned, he aimed from the ground at her face.

"Bang! You're dead!" He said slyly as he fired.

The woman's suit locked up and she fell to the ground. He heaved while letting his adrenaline cool down. A few more seconds and the woman disappeared in a shimmer of blue. He did it! He won!

The arena level disintegrated around him, reverting back to its generic empty state. He chucked the rifle away and swaggered weakly to the window where he knew the others were watching.

"CAN!" He shouted pointing at them with an insidious smile. He exited out a nearby door and began chucking pieces of his armor onto the floor.

"That doesn't count!" A tall blonde haired man with a buzz cut shouted at him. This was the guy who had challenged him in the first place, but didn't have the guts to actually fight. Something about 'officiating the match.' Behind the man, the rest of his team stood by their lockers putting away their gear and grunting unsatisfied.

"The rules were completely fair," La Rosa defended. "Three minutes and five bullets. You never said anything about whose gun I could use."

"There's no-"

"It's just as unfair as helping your buddies from behind the scene. If you want to argue semantics, we can have an arena official review the match's vid. I don't think you want to wait that long though, especially if he's just going to say you lost. Now pay up!"

They stared down each other for a few seconds before the blonde man conceded and opened his omni-tool.

"That's a good boy," La Rosa said as he walked away. "Maybe next time

we can go 'mano y mano' so your boys can't do all your dirty work."

He walked past the other soldiers and nodded. Most of them looked away or pretended they didn't see him. However, the female soldier and him met with their eyes sternly locked towards each other. He noticed her name, Greenwood, on her armor.

"You got talent, Greenwood," he said. "Keep practicing. Maybe one day these guys won't have to hold you back." She nodded and resumed taking off her armor.

He turned to see a dumbfounded and wide-eyed Resolme still by the window staring at him. "The match is over, greenhorn." He chuckled without breaking his stride. "We can go now unless you need your eyes to relax."

Resolme quickly caught up as they exited. "I don't know-" He stammered.

"There's nothing to really say," La Rosa said. "I kicked their asses!"

"You didn't have to do that."

"And what, let them get away with calling you those names? No one bad mouths our greenhorns except us."

Resolme looked back to the arena. "God! That's pro level stuff you just pulled."

"Yup," La Rosa said as he reached into his shirt. "You can be a Blood Dragon fan, a Reckoner Knight fan or any other fan. And there's nothing wrong with that. Anyone with half a brain knows the current Blood Dragon line-up will own this year."

He pulled out what he was looking for. Looped in the chain of his dog tag were two arena combat championship rings. Like anything of value, he kept them close to his heart.

"But any true arena combatant should know one simple rule," he said proudly, "Don't screw with a Grey Warden!"

* * *

><p>"Ha! No tell me that's not true," Kyle chuckled.<p>

"Honest!" David said as he drank from his glass. Ever since they arrived at the Korean restaurant, David had been chewing Kyle's ear off with stories. Some of them were things Kyle knew little to nothing about, but at least David made them interesting to listen to.

"So we offer Kitt a sizeable sum for the job. He told us how much he wanted to work in vids, especially with oh, how did he put it? 'The extravagant and exhilarating advances in extranet distribution.' I mean what, did this guy step out of the 22th century?" David joked.

Kyle's eyes drifted to the other people around them. Kim entertained

Emma across the table while Sandra and Joseph discussed something that was certainly outside his demographic. It's not that he wasn't paying attention to David, but he just found the scene charming. In spite of the Korean restaurant's flaunted style and cleanliness, there was something that still made it inviting for a family. It was also surprisingly multicultural for being such a specific cuisine, with human, Asari and Unggoy servers bouncing between tables. At least the kids were behaving themselves. Heaven knows that rowdy and obnoxious kids ruin the atmosphere.

"Didn't the guy know you were paying him by the episode?" Kyle asked as he focused back to David.

"I know, right? He was only doing two or three episodes, but it's a pretty prestigious job. He's one of those award hungry types, so that should have sweetened the deal," David continued. "So we're preparing to shoot the first episode and everyone's excited. I mean, who would have believed we got Francis Kitt to get off his stage and do vids?"

"And thenâ€¦?" Kyle anticipated the 'but' moment.

"And then we get a call from his agent saying he's not interested anymore. I'm all, 'What? What could be so important that he would bail on the project?'" David then chuckled. "The agent then told meâ€¦" David slipped into a goofy British accent. "'Mr. Kitt has found a new venture that would be more suitable and challenging for his skills.' That's when I saw a notice posted up on an entertainment news site for his production of Hamlet with an Elcor cast!"

"Elcor?" Kyle said surprised.

"I kid you not. Francis Kitt's Hamlet is an all elcor production. THAT'S more interesting than a miniseries on the Great Schism?"

"He does realize he has to make an Elcor act right? Fitting a Mgalekolo through a needle's eye is easier than that."

"That's what everyone said. Kitt had some defense how it's about judging 'Hamlet by his deeds and not his emotions.' You know, to placate the arty types."

Kyle shrugged. "Guess making a theater guy play for the other team was too much to ask for."

"I guess," David sighed. "Who would have thought live theater would see such a revival over the last few decades? Ah well! I'm directing the pilot episode now, so good for me."

"On that short a notice?"

"Sure. I've been working on this for so long I can recite the script in my sleep. Kim knows that," David joked as he nodded towards Kim.

"Oh yes," Kim played along. "It's mesmerizing. It's like someone narrating a Terrence Malick film."

"Har dee har har!" David mocked. "You're lucky Kyle doesn't watch old movies so he can't get that joke."

Actually, Kyle had seen quite a few older films. David obviously introduced everyone in the family to some of the classics, but Kyle had seen a few on his own accord. You could find anything with extranet technology. David was right though. He had no idea what they were talking about!

"Sorry, I could talk entertainment all day," David said as he 'waved' the conversation away. "This is about you, Kyle. I mean, how long has it been?"

"Too long," Kyle replied.

"I'll say," Kim chimed in. "Mom and Dad were surprised when they found out you were coming back. Oh, and they said sorry by the way."

"What? Sorry that they couldn't drop everything and visit me on a day's notice? Shocker! I thought everyone was made of money like you guys are," Kyle joked. He was surprised that he was in such good spirits at the moment. Maybe it was the anticipation of actual Earth made food but he enjoyed it still.

"They really would have loved to come," Kim said flatly.

"I know, I know. I'll give them a call later," Kyle said retracting his jokey tone. Kim didn't usually joke about family, even if she was perfectly fine teasing David.

"They're doing fine though," David said. "But you can bet they were stunned to hear that big bad Kyle found the Master Chief."

"Yeah!" Sandra piped in. "Grandpa didn't talk for forever after Dad said that. He looked liked this." She then made a goofy 'stunned look' face that probably wasn't too far off from the real reaction.

"So first we resurrected theater and now Earth's most famous hero," David said to Kyle. "Only logical progression is to bring back the dinosaurs."

"What's a dinosaur?" Emma asked.

"I'll tell you later, honey," Kim smiled as she turned back to Kyle. "Dad's very proud of you."

"I'm sure he is," Kyle said. Despite some of the tougher edges Kyle's father earned the ODST, he respected and cared for that man/

"Is that ours, dad?" Joseph said as he pointed to an Asari carrying a large tray of fresh dishes.

"I think so," David said as he signaled her over. "Took long enough."

The Asari arrived at the table and started laying out the plates to their respective person. "My apologies for the wait," she said cheerfully. "I hope everything is to your liking."

"If this kimchi tastes as good as it smells, I will be very content,"

David said to her as she placed a dish of pork andâ€|some other stuff in front of him. Kyle hadn't tried much Korean, so he went with a safe dish of stir-fried chicken. He still couldn't pronounce the proper name for it though!

"Let me know if I can bring anything else for you," the Asari said politely as she moved to another table.

"Alright, don't make a mess everyone," Kim said to the children. "We don't want to look nasty before we go to church."

â€|that was something Kyle didn't expect to hear.

"What now?" He said befuddled.

Kim turned to him surprised. "I thought I told you we were all going to church today."

Kyle shook his head. "I don't recall that."

"Wellâ€|that's what we have planned. There's a service today."

"You're coming too, right uncle Kyle?" Emma asked him innocently.

Kyle was in a bind now as everyone's eyes fell upon him. Church wasn't a priority in his agenda, but he couldn't turn down the invitation now without looking like a jerk to the kids.

"â€|well, I don't have a 'Sunday best' to wear," Kyle sighed.

"Oh no worries," David in the middle of chewing his food. "Kim brought an extra suit. She figured you probably wouldn't have one."

Kyle gave a quick glare to Kim, who averted his gaze. He knew she hadn't mentioned church in any of her messages. She probably set him up for this moment to happen so he would go. They had his word now, so that's all she cared about.

Kyle picked up a fork and twirled around his food. Looks like his shore leave was going to be more spiritual, whether he wanted it to be or notâ€|

* * *

><p>First came the slow rise of the intro. A chorus of men and women joined together in a steadily rising note accompanied by a shimmering sound. Then came the drums with a steadily, pounding rhythm accompanied by a distinctly Russian chant. Then came the electronic music. Each new piece built the song bit by bit, ratcheting the scale and the intensity.<p>

That's exactly the kind of music Julianne Engelbrektsson likes!

The surge of biotic energy that rippled from her hands was enough a sign that she should buy the album. She took the sampler earpiece off and examined the title: The Complete Works of Jesper Kyd. She had never heard of this guy before, but he sure had some good music!

It had been a while since she visited a proper antique music shop. Most music was just streamed or purchased through the extranet amongst other carriers, but there was still a place and purpose for actual stores to buy music from. It was a small, modestly decorated building with promotional ads for various kinds of music plastered all over, but the atmosphere was what she treasured. It was nice and simple, without the throb and glitz of "professionally ran" retro stores. Only true admirers of old music could provide this experience and there were few admirers better than squidheads.

"That's pretty good stuff," she said to the Sanghelli at the counter.

"I know right!" The young Sanghelli squeaked with excitement. He was not a particularly tall Sanghelli for his age, but he wasn't a pushover either. He wore the shop's traditional work outfit, but it had custom stickers and items he picked to stand out. He also had a variety of tattoos to show off his fandoms. She particularly admired the Nine Inch Nails tattoo on his arm! "Some of his later albums are great too, but those first few albums are to die for. Want any other suggestions?"

"I'm good. Put that in my cart with the rest," she said as she approached the counter.

Engelbrektsson knew being the team's biotic support was nothing to scoff at. She may be able to fling numbskulls like La Rosa with her mind, but that much power without some kind of center was dangerous. She had heard the stories about the L2 implant side effects and even though her L3 implants were superior, she decided to not take any precautions. After testing out various methods to help hone her skills, she found that music was the best option for her. Not just one type of music either. Her playlist contained easy listening, hard metal, jazz, instrumental, classic rock, dub step and all kinds of genres. This was especially valuable during practice and even thinking of the right song during combat helped channel her energy the right way.

"Quite a purchase you're making today," the Sanghelli said as he scanned her online cart with a datapad.

"I may not be back for a while," she said matter of fact. "Might as well stock up for the long haul."

"They keep you Alliance types busy?"

"Not enough to stop the music!"

The Sanghelli pumped a fist as he showed the total. She was just happy she budgeted her income because that was more than expected.

"So are you visiting family?" The Sanghelli asked as she paid for the music.

"Nope. We're on shore leave for finding the Master Chief," she said plainly. Since the cat was out of the bag about their little treasure hunt, there was no reason to hide it.

The Sanghelli's mouth went agape, or at least their equivalent of it. "For real? You found the Chief?"

She shrugged. "Yeah. We were in the right place at the right time."

"Well then why the hell are you paying for this?" He tapped on the datapad. "Let me just--"

"No thank you," she stopped him.

"But you guys are--"

"Just soldiers. He's the celebrity. I don't need any special treatment."

The Sanghelli would have persisted, but her stare caused him to back off. "Alright," he said anxious now. "Anything else I can get for you?"

"I'm good," she said. Seeing he was bummed about not being able to wave off her payment, she figured she should lighten his mood. "I'll make sure to recommend this store to anyone who wants good music."

The Sanghelli's mandible perked into a smile. "That'd be great! Thanks a billion!"

She nodded as she exited the store. Wellâ€|that was the only real thing on her to do list. Now she had to find something else to do! There was certainly no shortage of venues in New Mombasa, but doing them by yourself was strange. She shrugged as she decided to pick a few areas to visit. As she walked away, she wondered what the rest of the squad was doing right nowâ€|

* * *

><p>Kyle loosened the tie on his suit as he followed David, Kim and the kids. It was likely just a nervous reaction, because the tie wasn't tight at all. Why he was nervous he had no idea. It's not like going to church would kill him. He went every Sunday with his family when he was growing up. That was a long time ago though.<p>

He had been noticeably quieter ever since they left the Korean restaurant. He was still irritated that Kim had sprung this on him by surprise. Granted, he should have put it together that Sunday equaled church, but she should have told him anyway. She must have figured he would have said no, which he probably would have but politely of course.

"Are you sure this is the nearest chapel?" Kim asked David as the kids tailed along behind her.

"It's a little farther than I expected, but yes," David replied back. It was his idea to go by foot, as he wanted to recreate the old fashioned tradition. However, twenty minutes of walking was certainly more than 'just a few blocks away.' At least the weather was decent.

After crossing one more street, the chapel came into view. If there

was one thing Kyle still remembered, it's that these chapels were very modest in appearance. They had all the material and essential functions of a modern building, but their design was intentionally low key. No flashy colors, small size, no complicated patterns and nothing too expensive in design. It certainly was out of place compared to all the other buildings surrounding it.

Kyle noted how funny religion was these days as they followed a diverse group to the building. There were ups and downs in popularity depending on the political and social climate of that decade or century. Some religions endured the test of time to have millions of practicing members to this day. Others fell by the wayside for failing to adapt, making bad choices or simply becoming unpopular. And even more continued to be founded to find their place in a confused religious atmosphere. It was interesting to study historically, even if just for mere curiosity.

However, the last century brought about an unforeseen revival in religious interest thanks to the Human-Covenant War. The fact that it was brought about by religious fanatics certainly jaded many people, but others emerged from the rubble with stirred consciences and existential dilemmas to face. Kyle's grandfather was one of those people and it's his actions that led to his family being churchgoers. Nothing like the near extinction of your species to stir up curiosity of an afterlife.

There was certainly no end of human religions to seek after. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and many popular religions along with their sects opened their arms to the hungry and grief stricken masses. Many faiths had to adapt their doctrine to accommodate the discovery of extraterrestrial life. Of course, like anything with religion, it stirred up no end of controversy for how to appropriately accept other lifeforms.

However, an even more intriguing development was the intermingling with new races. Once the Covenant races became allies, they started sharing their own beliefs and philosophies with humanity. It was a good move on their part. What had previously been known as a misguided super cult was revealed to be a collective of diverse and intriguing theologies that sought understanding like any human faith. The Sanghelli faith is still the most well known, but other beliefs amongst the Unggoy and Kig-Yar have found acceptance with human culture.

Things only continued to expand from there. The fallout of the First Contact War and intermingling with the Citadel races opened new avenues for the religious student and casual observer alike. The Asari religion Siari, the Athame Doctrine, the Salarian Wheel of Life, Drell polytheism, Hanar belief in the 'Enkindlers' and more were quickly introduced into the already complicated religious atmosphere. Kyle was surprised people could even think with so many different voices shouting at them, but each faith managed to be fairly represented amongst the human population regardless.

Which made him all the more surprised that his church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, was still thriving after all of that.

It was nowhere near the oldest Christian sect, but the Church has seen its fair share of history over the last few centuries. It was

one of the first major faiths that, right behind Catholicism, openly embraced and encouraged interaction with other alien races. It didn't make a lot of friends doing so, but the Church had never been very concerned with popularity.

It was also amongst the loudest voices for missionary work on a galactic scale, even outside of religious preaching. Stories have been told of its missionaries lending service across the galaxy to both human and alien alike. From establishing agriculture for developing colonies to running community centers on the Citadel, the Church's presence has been felt if even just in small doses. Church promotion material still circulates inspiring photos of interspecies connection to help the cause, including a famous photo with two human missionaries playing soccer with Turians, Salarrians, Sanghelli and Unggoy. Despite general tolerance to it as a faith and the occasional alien convert, it was still a largely human religion.

So Kyle would have never have guessed someone like the person greeting them would have joined.

"Enthusiastic greeting, welcome brothers and sisters to our chapel," a large Elcor wearing his race's equivalent to church clothes boomed with his droning monotone. Elcors continued to be a mystery to Kyle, more than wondering how anyone could baptize one to begin with. Despite being incredibly huge and with arms that could crush cars, Elcors were one of the least intimidating races he had ever met. Something about their slow movement, monotone and overly friendly speech just seemed off to him.

"Proper introduction," the Elcor continued to drone, "My name is Brother Urlyn. Is this your first time visiting?"

"Yes and just for today," David said. "We're from out of town. Sacrament hasn't started yet, has it?"

"Confident reassurance, no it has not. We are about to begin Sunday School."

"Yay!" Sandra said excitedly. "I hope the kids are nicer here than the last place."

Kyle looked back to see a nicely dressed Sanghelli exit from the building as other humans and a few Asari walked into the building.

"Salutations, brothers and sisters," the Sanghelli said as he shook Kim and David's hands. "Always a pleasure to have visitors."

"Informative statement," the Elcor said to the Sanghelli. "Brother Ak'Thom, you should show them where the classrooms are."

"Very true," Ak'Thom said, "Getting lost would do none of us well. Please follow me."

The group proceeded to follow Ak'Thom and Urlyn into the building—except for Kyle.

"Hey Kyle," David said turning back to him. "Are you coming?"

"Uh, yeah," Kyle said hesitantly. "Justâ€¦uh, just give me a minute."

"Alright. We'll save a seat for you," David said as the group disappeared around a corner.

Kyle wandered a few steps away from the building as he ran his fingers through his hair. He suddenly felt very uncomfortable. Was it fear? Guilt? Anger? He couldn't quite pinpoint it. It just didn't feel right. For some reason, the idea of his squad judging him for going to church ran through his mind. It was totally irrational, but he did so anyway.

He sat on the curb outside the building and sighed. He took a moment to reflect as a few stragglers entered the chapel. He didn't deny there may be a God out there. Heaven knows he's been in moments where only divine intervention could have kept him alive. He just hadâ€¦doubts. Doubts about why he had to go through what he did in the First Contact War. Doubts about why people he knew were better than him died while he continued on. And doubts aboutâ€¦forgiving. He knew there were probably simple answers to these. Just not satisfying ones for him. Going to Church today was not likely to change much.

A thought ran through his mind. He could just leave. The others would be none the wiser and he could do something he wanted to do instead. He toyed the thought around for a few minutes, seriously considering it as an option.

He sighed. He was being a baby. It's church! If he could fight Jiralhanae and Batarians, he could sit through a church meeting. Just be polite, don't raise a hand for questions and it will be over quickly. It was just like any other meeting he's been to.

With a deep sigh, Kyle stood back up and entered the building. He hoped three hours would be as short as he remembered it being...

****Codex Entry: (Humanity and the Systems Alliance)
Entertainment****

Entertainment and dramatization has important cultural significance for most races. Humans in particular have a proclivity to seek diversion, understanding and other necessities through the arts. Over the centuries, their arts have evolved from drawing on cave walls to elaborate productions through moving picture storytelling.

Following the Human-Covenant War, entertainment found itself both as a pariah and a necessity for recovery. While many decried to idea of trying to use the arts to divert from serious reconstruction, others saw it as a necessity for the same goal. Numerous enterprises were ruined from the ramifications of the war, but others endured or adapted to find new means to communicate to the masses.

_Some artists chose to resurrect old forms of entertainment such as live stage theater as a way to interact with local audiences on more intimate levels. Others chose to pursue the newly established extranet as a means for mass distribution. Comedy and historical stories dominated the scene for many years, but more diverse genres developed as people began talking about the Human-Covenant War and

First Contact War more frankly. After a few decades, the entertainment world for human kind re-emerged as a thriving enterprise._

Further growth came as intermingling commenced. Art forms from the Sanghelli, Asari, Turians and other races found their audiences on Earth to great success. Likewise, human entertainment was exported and marketed with cross-species appeal in mind. Human driven cinemas and stage theaters found homes on the Citadel while human extranet programming continues to receive phenomenal ratings across the board. New technology and storytelling continues to be developed in hopes of furthering the arts and communication to many individuals.

To learn more about human and other species entertainment history, visit the respective extranet links.

****Now to Part 3!****

7. Some Time Apart (Part 3)

****And now for the final part of this lengthy chapter. And what better way to start this than with a little titillation?****

* * *

><p>Tonight was a test of endurance for Tu'uta Tangilanu. After Mosese whisked him away from the group, it was party central. Or at least that's how Mosese referred to going from one place to another without a plan in his head. They hit a few bars, toured stores, popped in a dance club, ate a buffet almost to bankruptcy and stopped anywhere Mosese could think of. Tangilanu was unfortunately just there for the ride.<p>

Well, that and to be an object of attention. Everywhere they went, Mosese had to remind people that Tangilanu helped to find the Master Chief. The expected "oohs" and "aahs" they got were cute at first, but after the seventeenth time it was a nuisance.

It was hard to just be angry with Mosese though. He had gone a great length to get to New Mombasa and it was not exactly cheap either, even with Mosese's discount as a serviceman. Plus, Mosese was one of those people too innocent to stay mad at for long. It was like a clumsy puppy, where they mean well despite being completely careless. And he knew Mosese did care for him as family, so that counted for something.

Though this recent stop was not exactly a family activity.

"Come on, fototehina," Mosese said just an octave too loud. He was very visibly tipsy after the last bar they stopped at. "Just one. I promise, just one and we can do whatever you want."

"You've been saying that all day," Tangilanu said frustrated.

"Psshhâ€|no! â€|Maybe. Still, I mean it. Just this one! I'll pay for it. It'll help yaâ€|loosen up," Mosese said as he made a noodle motion with his arms.

Tangilanu sighed. He wasn't a prude, but strip clubs were not his favorite places. He could handle filth and sleaze. That came with his job. This was something else though. It was a desperate man who paid for something he could get for free.

"Please! I might not get to see you for a long time after today," Mosese said making a begging gesture. "You'll thank me later!"

Tangilanu sighed. He had no idea why he was entertaining this. "Just one. That's it."

Mosese beamed. "I love you, fototehina! You're the best!" He wrapped an arm around Tangilanu's neck as they entered into the building. If the Mgalekolo bouncers weren't intimidating enough, the club's name, The Gutter, served as an ominous and ironic taunt!

The previously faint electronic music now blasted at full volume all around them. Smoke filled Tangilanu's lungs instantly, overpowering the other odious odors of the place. Customers of all races and genders occupied the various chairs and stools as they sought their individual or group entertainment. The "workers" were predominantly human, though there were a fair share of Asari and even a Turian entertaining the masses. There were even holographic entertainers for the truly pathetic! High class this certainly was not.

"Whoo!" Tangilanu shouted as he soaked in the atmosphere. "Now this is a party. That dance club is shit compared to this." He was lying through his teeth to even think of saying that.

"I know! Bring on the titties!" Mosese said with drunk excitement.

A particularly sultry black woman approached the two of them and stroked under Tangilanu's chin. Of course! They always aim for the guy who doesn't want to be there. She was tall and slender, with that outfit he had seen the dancers at Chora's Den wear. To be fair, it flattered her. "Hey boys," she said with a distinctly Nigerian accent. "What brings you to our little club?"

"Celebrating!" Mosese answered quickly as he slipped his arm off of Tangilanu. "This man here found the Master Chief!"

"Oh?" She said with playful teasing. "Did he now?"

"Yes ma'am! Pulled him out of the cyro pod himself!" Mosese exaggerated. It seemed that the more drunk Mosese got, the bigger Tangilanu's part in the event became.

"Well then," she said eyeing Tangilanu from head to toe, "Big hero like him needs the special treatment."

"Don't you know it!" Mosese said as he opened an omni tool tab. "Give him a private show! Treat him nice! Maybe bring another woman into it!" Mosese was having some trouble tapping the keys, but he managed to set things up for payment. He then turned to an Asari waitress carrying alcohol glasses. "I'll meet you later, cuz. My buzz is wearing off," he said before stumbling away.

So Tangilanu was getting a private show. Great! He could smell the bodily fluids already. One dance. That is all he promised Mosese and

that was all he would get. Then they would get the hell out of there!

"Come this way, big hero," the black woman said as she led him to a back room. He followed with his hands in his pockets as she motioned an Asari dancer to follow them. Once they reached the room, the women activated a holographic curtain to block onlookers wanting a peep show.

Tangilanu didn't need to be told what to do. He had been to strip clubs before for bachelor parties and 'special events.' He lay on the couch and placed his arms up to ensure the 'no touching' rule was kept.

"Good man," the black woman said. "Knows how to do things right! Now just sit back and enjoy." The two women then began their routine, moving their bodies and caressing each other like strippers would.

Tangilanu found his eyes wandering around the room. They were decent looking enough for their profession, but he suddenly registered how little fun he had been having today. Semi-nude ladies wouldn't improve that.

This did not escape the women's notice. "Something wrong, hero?" The black woman said still dancing with the Asari. "We not appealing you?"

"No. I mean, you're not appealing me just fine, I guess," he said still half paying attention.

"You can tell us what's on your mind," the Asari said as she moved her hands up and down the black woman's body. "We're good listeners."

This seemed like the least likely place he should have this discussion. He didn't have a lot of options though.

"Do you have siblings or cousins?" He struggled thinking to say what he wanted. "Do either of you have siblings or cousins?"

"I have my brother and sister down in Lagos," the black woman said as she bent over with her rear facing him.

"I have some sisters on other planets," the Asari added. "I haven't seen them in a while."

"If only I was so lucky," he mumbled.

The two women moved closer as they did some more saucy dance moves. "Now why you say that?" The black woman said. "Family is real important."

He was finding it hard to focus with the Asari's bust in his field of vision, but he continued. "I know. Heck, I'm Tongan. Family's as important to us as breathing. Some people just don't know."

"Was that man you came with family?" The Asari said rubbing his leg.

"Yeah. My cousin. I haven't seen him in a while and he really made an effort to come see me," he said.

"Aw, that's sweet," the black woman said stroking his cheek.

"Yeahâ€|but all we've been doing is-" His thought was cut off as he could feel the Asari stroke along his side. It tickled him the right way, but he forced himself to continue. "Just doing what he wants."

"Well, you've been going along with it," the black woman said. "It's not like you're suffering."

"True. And he's paid for everythingâ€|" he started. "I'm not ungratefulâ€|"

"â€|but you feel like he hasn't been listening to you," the Asari continued his thought as she brought her leg on top of his for her move.

"â€|yeah," he said trying to not be aroused. "My family's more doers than listeners. Still, he's one of those guys. He steamrolls over people just by virtue of being him and people have to follow."

"Oh. We've all been there, hon," the black woman said as she stood up to continue her dance. "It's about give and take. He's happy to see you, but he should respect your wants too. And if you don't want to do something, tell him. You're a big boy, Mr. hero. Don't let him push you around because he's so tall."

She had to add that part. It wasn't necessary. Mosese kept calling him fototehina all day and being called 'little brother' when he was technically older than Mosese was tiring. He wished his other cousin hadn't made that joke all those years ago.

"He'll listen if you speak up," the Asari said as they slowed down their dance. "At least if he is truly family."

After a few seconds, the two women stopped. "Time's up, hero," the black woman said.

Tangilanu hopped to his feet and made his way out. Before he left though, the two women stopped him and gave him a peck on both cheeks.

"You've been the best one all night," the black woman said. "Come back any time, hero."

As not appealing as the thought was, he at least appreciated the gesture. "Uhâ€|thanks."

He wandered out into the club's main floor as he spotted Mosese at the bar. Mosese was being particularlyâ€|.animated. He spotted several empty glasses that most likely contributed to that.

"My cousin is the bestest of the shooting people!" Mosese slurred to some woman who was clearly not listening to him. "He will find the Master Chief and they'll fight anything. He could make a thresher mawâ€|" Mosese lost his train of thought before giggling.

Then Mosese spotted Tangilanu. "Cousin!" He slurred as he tried to walk over. "Them pretty ladies treat you nice? Let's stay here ALL night!"

"I think we need to go, Mosese," Tangilanu said as he grabbed his arm.

"I think YOU need to goâ€¦not Mosese," Mosese attempted to joke with titters. He stumbled a few steps back and chuckled. "I got the women and lots of drinking to make me-"

And that was all Mosese was going to say as he tripped backwards and passed out on the floor with a loud thud. It spooked several people nearby.

"It's ok!" Tangilanu said loud enough for them to hear as he went to Mosese's side. "He just had too much partying tonight." The crowd watched for a few seconds more before losing interest and resuming their activities.

A human bouncer came over to talk to Tangilanu, who intercepted the man before he could say anything. "I know, I know. We should leave." Tangilanu tapped at his omni tool and showed the written text to the bouncer. "That's the address to his hotel. Call an aircab to take him back. I'll cover the charges."

The bouncer opened his omni tool to copy the address and nodded. As much as Tangilanu felt guilty for just ditching Mosese, he wasn't about to just waste the night dragging him around. He had a few places he wanted to visit and only an hour before they closed. He'd probably have to wait until tomorrow for the war history museum though.

He looked behind his shoulder to see a couple bouncers lift Mosese out as he walked out. On the way out, he bumped into someone coming in. He took a step back and realized that he recognized the person.

"Engelbrektsson? What are you doing here?"

She registered whom she had bumped into as well. "Tangilanu? What does it look like I'm doing here?"

He raised his eyebrows amused. "Didn't think this was your kind of place."

"I don't swing that way, stupid. It's just for the entertainment value. Not like I have much better to do."

He chuckled. "Don't waste your time. This place sucks. I got some better ideas in mind."

"Oh? Not one of your museum trips, are they?"

"No!" He mentally made a note to not take her there tomorrow. "Just some other stuff."

Two bouncers then walked between them dragging Mosese out as an aircab arrived.

"Is that Mosese?" Engelbrektsson said concerned.

"He'll be fine," Tangilanu said as he motioned her to walk. "Come on. We're burning moonlight."

* * *

><p>Kyle sat on a bar stool alone. The place was just as fancy as everywhere else in the hotel, though the emptiness and late hour into the night certainly added a creep factor. But Kyle was not tired enough to leave. Aside from a few games they played upon arriving back at the hotel, the rest of the evening had been uneventful. He was too wired to just call it a lazy Sunday. Now everyone else was asleep, so he'd have to handle this insomnia alone.<p>

"Need a refill?" A Salarian bartender asked pointing to Kyle's glass.

"Why not?" Kyle said. The bartender took it for a refill.

Kyle opened up his omni-tool and replayed Resolme's footage of opening the Chief's pod. He still didn't fully appreciate how strange that event truly was. As much as he didn't want the Chief bothering his thoughts, he had to wonder what that guy was doing now. Kyle and the other soldiers got to return to a planet they knew and loved. The Chief was visiting a planet that was as foreign to him as if it was Illium. Kyle didn't envy that.

"David always suspected you had a vid," a voice behind him said.

Kyle quickly shut off his omni-tool and spun around to see Kim. She had some heavy bags under her eyes and she was dressed in something between pajamas and clothes decent enough to be seen in public. Yet there she was up and awake.

"Why are you up so late?" Kyle asked.

"I could ask you the same," She said as she sat next to him. "I wasn't fully exaggerating when I said David talks in his sleep."

The bartender returned with a full glass of Kyle's drink of choice: water. He took a long sip.

"Nice," Kim said as she turned to the bartender. "I'll have the same."

"I don't like the taste of alcohol, if you're wondering," Kyle said to her.

"I didn't doubt that," she said back.

Silence hung over them as Kyle's fingers drummed along the counter and the bartender brought Kim's drink. She took a sip and cleared her throat.

"You knowâ€¦I was thinking a lot about grandpa," she said.

"Because of the whole 'families can be together forever' talk today?"

He said snarkily.

"No," she said. "Because of you." Kyle raised an eyebrow as he turned to her. "I thought about how proud he'd be of you. On top of everything else, you brought the Master Chief back from the dead. I'm sure grandpa would have begged to be resurrected early to see it himself."

The two of them chuckled at that.

She sighed. "On the other handâ€¦" She took a sip of her drink. "He never served in the ODST as long as you. Heck, even as long as dad. Not by much mind you, but at least they had a quit date in mind."

Kyle didn't say anything as he took another sip.

"Do you?" She inquired.

"Iâ€¦I 've got too many responsibilities to just quit," he defended. "The galaxy is a dangerous place and they need everyone's help."

"Kyle, even dad was married way before he was your age and he was still serving."

Great, he thought to himself. One of these talks again. "So what?" He said sternly. "Yeah, I'm in my forties and unmarried. I'm not the only guy."

"No, but I just don't understand it," Kim said back. "You know we all love having you around. The kids love hearing your stories and David has a heyday catching you up on everything. It's justâ€¦" She set her glass down. "The last thing we need the kids to see is you in-

"That's not going to happen." Kyle interrupted.

"You don't know that," she said. "You knew when you joined that the ODST was suicidal."

"They've done a lot to ensure our safety since then."

"Who knows when that luck will run out? It's not like you're Spartans or Spectres. We don't need a dead war hero. I'd rather have my brother here so I can talk to him like old times."

Kyle set his drink down and sighed as he eyed his synthetic hand. "Those are old times for a reason."

Kim finished her drink glumly. "Where did those days go?"

"I really have no ideaâ€¦" He said to himself more than to her.

"I've always wondered when we'll have another family reunion. Just all of us together under one roof again. That'd be nice."

"Hopefully the smoke alarm won't go off again like last time."

She chuckled. "We may have been overzealous putting all those candles on dad's cake."

"Just a little."

She sat up and began to walk away before stopping. "I'm sorry," she said. "I worry about you. I justâ€¦I just want you to be happy." She walked out of the bar presumably to go back to bed.

Kyle wasn't exactly sure if he felt like an asshole or totally justified for anything they just talked about. Kim was always a good sister, but sometimes she could be a bitâ€¦he couldn't find the word for it. It did make him think though, which he was sure was her intention the entire time. Just another think to keep him awake.

Then he noticed that the bartender had been listening the whole time. "Do you want to talk about it?" The bartender asked.

"Does this look like the Cheers remake to you?" He said. "Just get me more water."

* * *

><p>Beckett sat down at the desk in her hotel room. The night was winding down and she felt beat. To be honest, she really enjoyed shore leave. Some people could get restless having this much down time after so many months in space, but she saw it as a way to really unwind.<p>

And this shore leave was longer than usual due to the Chief's return so she was making the most of it. She had shopped for the essentials. She found some good leisure items for downtime. She had seen the sights she needed to. She sorted some Earth business she needed to attend to. She phoned a few old friends she hadn't seen in ages. She had even found time for dinner by herself at a really nice restaurant. It was a good start for sure.

Yet the night was not done yet. There was still a call to make.

She opened up the desk's vid phone and typed in her desired number. It had been a while since she had a last called and she wouldn't be able to see them anytime soon. She had figured that the time difference from New Mombasa and London would mean they were still up so they would have time to talk.

After a few rings, an older woman answered. "Hello?"

"(Hello mother!)" Beckett said happily switching over to their native Sri Lankan tongue Tamil.

The woman's eyes widened with excitement and she smiled greatly. "(Oh! My little soldier!)" She adjusted her own chair as she continued the conversation. "(I was wondering when you would call.)"

"(Sorry about that,)" Beckett apologized. "(Busy day today.)"

"(I heard that you're in New Mombasa. That must be exciting.)"

Becket was going to ask how she knew, but remembered that her fleet would have been mentioned in the news broadcasts talking about the Chief. "(Yes!)" She replied. "(I'm enjoying the sights too. How has London been treating you?)"

"(Well it's not Kotte,)" her mother answered in reference to their hometown in Sri Lanka. "(But it suits us nicely.)"

"(That makes me happy,)" Beckett said cheerfully. "(How has dad been doing?)"

Her mother hesitated on that one. "(He'sâ€|he's been fine. Better.)"

Beckett paused. Things must still be pretty sensitive if her mom would respond like that. "(Goodâ€|)" She said to tip toe across the subject.

"(He's asleep right now, but I know he'd be happy to see you,)" her mother said.

"(No don't. If he's asleep, I'll call-)"

"(Nonsense! It's not often he gets to see his daughter. I'll be right back.)" Her mother tapped a button on the vid screen and a hold icon appeared.

Beckett anticipated the talk. She didn't know how bad his condition had gotten since they last talked. No one could really identify whatever the problem was either. He had worked with energy technologies for many years trying to create more efficient energy output. He had tinkered with all kinds of elements and forms, including Sanghelli plasma technology and more recently element zero. She knew element zero in high exposures could cause cancerous tumors and certain kinds of plasma exposure could lead to Boren's Syndrome. The problem was that her father seemed to have both types of tumors and even more complications from unknown sources. The doctors have tried best to help him, even relocating her parents to London for high quality treatment. All Beckett could do was hope it amounted to something.

Her father appearing on the vid screen neither confirmed nor denied that sentiment. He was in bed with IVs and tubes poking into his frail body as he stirred awake. He looked thinner than before and his hair was falling out more rapidly. The way he lifted himself up in the bed showed that he still tried to act like he had the strength of ten men, but his coughs were those of a dying man. It made Beckett smile sadly.

"Well well," her father spoke in his very posh British accent. "Now this is a sight for sore eyes." Beckett rarely told people that she was mixed race, since you could hardly see any hint of her English genes in her anyway. Her parents had met in Sri Lanka so many years ago and he fell in love with the country as much as he did with her mother. She knew that them being in England was not his first choice, but as long as her mother was there he could endure it.

"Hi dad," she said weakly.

"Oh don't talk like I'm dead yet," her father said bluntly but playfully. "You know that doctor's estimates are always off."

Beckett's heart felt heavy as she pondered that. She didn't know he had gotten his life expectancy estimation.

"Aw, don't look so sad hon," her father said noticing her concern. "I'm not going any sooner than I need to."

"I knowâ€|" She said. She eyed the wrinkles in his hands and face. They looked deeper than usual. He wasn't even THAT old.

"So I heard the big news," her father said. "You found the Master Chief!" He coughed harshly before continuing. "How did that happen?"

"A bunch of Turians found his ship and we found him," she said to put it briefly.

He chuckled softly. "So I lived long enough to see a real miracle. Now that's something."

Beckett leaned forward on the desk to the screen. "Dadâ€|" She said with a crack of emotion. "I wish I could be with you right now."

"I do too, but you're doing a great service."

"Dadâ€|"

"Sweetieâ€|I don't want to hold you back. If you do get to see me, that will be good. You're never too far away regardless." He moved his frail, shaking hand to his heart.

Beckett could feel a tear roll down her cheek.

"Let's not talk about depressing things the whole time," he said. "I want to laugh and I want to see you laugh. These calls should be about being happy and sharing stories. I will listen to every single one."

Beckett smiled. This was very un-soldier like of her, but sometimes she needed these moments to still feel human. "Naan unnai kathalikiren," she found herself saying in Tamil.

"And I love you too," he replied.

They were silent for a while, just treasuring the moment. This is what made these calls worthwhile.

"So you met any handsome men on your ship?" Her father teased as he broke the silence. "You're not getting any younger."

Beckett laughed. That was just like him to say thatâ€|

* * *

><p>The afternoon sun beat on Kyle's brow as he hugged the kids one last time. It had been a short visit, but he understood why they had to leave. David's work needed him back, especially with all the stuff

that had arisen with the Chief's arrival. Kyle would just as likely get a call from Ralston or the brass for some kind of work too. One day was far too long to let an experienced officer like him get lazy.<p>

"Come back soon," Sandra said as the kids released the embrace.

"I'll do my best," he said. It wasn't in his control, but he wouldn't dash their hopes with reality.

From behind the kids, David approached Kyle and gave him a quick but strong embrace. "Don't be a stranger, bud. Oh, and you promise right?"

"Yeah yeah! I'll have to talk to some people, but I'm sure you can get the rights to interview us for your documentary. Maybe the vid too."

"Yes!" He said pumping his arm. "You are the man. And hey, there's always that role in my new extranet miniseries if you change your mind."

"I doubt I'm that good an actor," Kyle said humbly. "Besides, who'd want to watch a western these days?"

"I'm telling you, they're coming back. The galaxy has opened up and it is a terrific parallel for an age of exploration. Plus, it has cross species appeal."

"You said that about found footage films."

David scoffed. "I can be wrong sometimes."

Kyle chuckled. "I'll think about it."

David and the kids went to the vehicle as Kim came up and embraced Kyle. "Be safe."

He knew she was worrying about nothing, but after their little chat last night he decided not to make a fuss about it. "Always am," he replied. Quick and to the point. That's all they needed to say.

And with that, Kim and her family went home. Kyle took a moment to reflect on yesterday. Whatever qualms he may have had or hiccups that happened on the way, it didn't end up being a bad experience. It reminded him of that moment he looked out the Mt. Everest's window at Earth. He needed that day.

Still, Kim's words from last night bothered him. She thought he wasn't happy? Why wouldn't he be? Sure he wasn't exactly a ray of sunshine at church, but at least he wasn't snoring like other people were. Was she seeing something in him that he didn't?

He pushed that thought aside. She didn't know what she was talking about. It was probably just something from not seeing him for so long. Nothing more.

Though now he had a different problem on his hand: what the hell else was he supposed to do with his time?

â€|which was answered immediately with a call on his omni tool.

"Hello?" He answered.

"Enjoying your time away from us?" A familiar female voice inquired.

He smiled. "Oh, just the time of my life, Beckett."

"I know a lie when I hear it."

"No lies! Still, if you miss me so much, I can squeeze some time for all of you.."

"I'd hate to take you away from your busy schedule," she teased. "But whenever you are open, we're having lunch at a place nearby."

Kyle thought it over for exactly a second. "Sure. Just tell me where and when." He made his way towards the sidewalk.

"You can honestly tell me if you're busy or not."

"I'm fine," he said. "I doubt I'll be hearing from CAPTAIN Ralston too soon anyway."

He smiled as he continued walking. Even if Ralston did call during their lunch, at least he will have been able to spend some good leisure time with the group. Sometimes being apart from each other for a while was a good thing. He just hoped they had something more than Korean in mind for lunchâ€|

** So there you have it. I do plan to have more action in my upcoming chapters as Kyle and the squad actually do missions, but hopefully this has been a decent enough set-up to build off of. Disagree or have some suggestions? PM me or write a review on the chapter. I am always open.
>

** And remember to check out the source story, The Last Spartan by DinoJake, to enjoy more goodness from this crossover universe.**

** Hope to get my next update up much sooner than three months!**

8. An Incredibly Hostile Takeover

Edit: Now fixed for formatting

So the unthinkable has happened. I have officially become burnt out on my Walking Dead RP and I want another change of pace. So here I am and here is more of the story.

**For this section, I decided to use an actual side mission from the game. It has some...embellishments of course but it will hopefully pay off. Now what I had planned was a little too long for just a two part segment like usual, so I will portion it out over the course of three to four chapters which I am working on as we speak. It'll have

action, drama, a couple laughs and, of course, more action!

>

**So with that set up, let's drop into the debriefing room to see what Captain Ralston has in store for Kyle and the crew...

>

* * *

><p>0235 Hours, February 27th, 2683<p>

Surface of Klensal

Dis System, Hades Gamma Cluster

_ "Planet Klensal. I assume some of us are vaguely familiar with this financial sinkhole." _

_ "Was that comment directed to me, Captain?" _

_ "Not unless you were involved with Merida Industria, La Rosa." _

_ "Not even a little." _

_ "Then shut the hell up and listen. Red Sand trafficking has seen an abnormal increase over the last few months throughout the Gemini Sigma, Hades Gamma and Voyager Clusters. Our anonymous tip, given graciously to our boys and girls at ONI and Command, identified one particular crime syndicate as the culprit. There's no official title for their group, but we know that they've usurped distribution control from the local dealers and crime rings through strong economic manipulation and an even stronger mercenary payroll. Bad enough, you say? Two days ago, a Batarian crime ring was raided by local law enforcement and guess what was found amongst their 'merchandise'? That's right, Red Sand users. Turns out the syndicate sells defaulting customers as 'compensation' for missing profit." _

_ "You'd think the Batarians would prefer healthier humans over 'dusters'." _

_ "I don't think they care, Resolme. As long as that human can work, the Batarians are willing to buy. And 'dusters' are easier to break than the average person. Regardless, ONI won't let this stand. It's only a matter of time before Jiralhane pirates or worse want in on the operation, so we're going on the offensive. Lieutenant Nolan." _

_ "Thank you, Captain. Now, the tip named Klensal as one of the syndicate's base of operations. Our squad will be dropped near the base alongside several of Captain Ralston's marines. Scans have shown the exterior is lightly defended, but there's no guarantee what kind of resistance we'll face inside." _

_ "So it's just a 'kill everyone' procedure?" _

_ "Actually Engelbrektsson, there will be a capture targets. And the key target is this man: Garrett Parker. Parker has been associated with other smaller crimes in the sector, but it looks like he's

graduated to the big money. He runs the syndicate cooperatively with a Kig-Yar named Nak 'Seva, who already has an outstanding arrest and bounty for prior trafficking activities. 'Seva's location is currently unknown, so detaining Parker and the key associates listed is vital to shutting this syndicate for good. We deploy at 0200 hours. Any questionsâ€|?"_

* * *

><p>Salim Dalamar checked his helmet's temperature gauge as he patrolled the front of the base. -35 Celsius flashed red on the visor. His suit was properly insulated against the cold, but just seeing that number made him shiver. Having these snowstorms providing cover from Alliance patrols shouldn't be worth being stuck on this damn freezer planet! It didn't make him feel any better patrolling this late at nightâ€|or early in the morning depending on one's perspective. He mumbled Arabic profanity between his yawns as he switched on his helmet's heat sensor. That prick Dargus was just screwing with him as usual. This was the fourth night shift in a row that Turian bastard scheduled Salim for. He'd think that being the unofficial 'second in command' under Dargus would give him more benefits but evidently Parker was ok with having Raptors boss around his own kind.<p>

Work was work though and tonight they needed to be extra prepared. The Eclipse, their chief Red Sand supplier, was bringing in a fresh shipment for distribution. However, that was supposed to have happened half an hour ago. It spooked the boss something good, so he made sure Dargus kept everyone on their toes. With luck, it was just some technical problem cause by the cold delaying them.

Salim looked back to see the base's snipers, a human and a Salarian, still guarding the front door. He gave a signal with his hand to see if they spotted anything. The snipers shook their heads. At least they had his back.

As he checked behind a rock cluster nearby, his comm. opened a private channel.

"(Everything looks good here, brother)," the voice said in Arabic. Salim was glad there was at least one other Arabic speaker in the group. Even though universal translators made it unnecessary to learn new languages, hearing his birth language warmed his heart.

"(Allah be praised, Hama)," Salim replied. "(Looks like we'll be out of the cold soon. Meet me back up front)." Salim then opened a broader channel for the two guards patrolling the opposite sides of the base. "Anything to report?"

"Jack shit," the Turian guard answered.

"Negative," the other human guard answered too.

All right, so far so good. "Ok, meet up front. I'll let Dargus know before we go back in," Salim replied. He gave one last quick look around. Nothing but snow, wind, rocks and more snow. He glanced back to check the cameras above the main door. He still found the patrolling excessive when the cameras could pick up anything suspicious, but at least they were still working.

This had to be a fluke. Parker and Dargus were just being overcautious as usual. They haven't been operating as their own business for long, but being jittery like this would be crippling if they kept this up for long.

As he started walking back, he saw Hama round the corner. He waved in greeting as they met up.

"Damn, these Eclipse are slow," Hama said frustrated.

"What do you expect with mercenaries, brother?" Salim replied as he folded his assault rifle. "Cheap bastards who work purely for money."

"Isn't that what we are?"

"At least we work for people with vision, even if it's an opaque one. The mercs just want to tear shit up. Our bosses have an empire planned."

"(As long as they don't step on certain people's toes)," Hama muttered quietly in Arabic.

"(What that certain person doesn't know won't hurt them)," Salim reassured. "(More money for us. Besides, we don't need that bitch's help.)"

"(She's got Parker shaking in his boots.)"

"(And he's got some very powerful friends working for him. He needs to grow a pair and deal with it. She tries to mess with us, she's gonna get stuck like a pig.)"

"(You better be right.)"

"(When am I not?)"

The other two guards approached them as the winds picked up outside.

"You tell Dargus everything's clear?" The Turian guard said. "I can feel my organs freezing together."

"I'm going to. I'm going to," Salim said. "We were just waiting for your slow asses to get here."

"Well they're here, so get to it," the other human guard said.

Salim rolled his eyes as he opened a channel to Dargus. "Dalamar checking in. Nothing suspicious going on a few yards in any direction."

"You can't be too sure, Salim," Dargus replied. "It's been half an hour. The Eclipse is more punctual than that. Keep watch until they get here."

That wasn't what Salim wanted to hear. "It's freezing out here, Dargus. Just let us back in. The radar and cameras will pick them up."

"Stop whining like an Unggoy bitch! You're suits are insulated, so you're not going to die staying out a few more minutes. Make sure they get here and then we'll talk about letting you in. Dargus out."

The channel abruptly closed. Salim kicked the snow with another Arabic swear. He was tired and just wanted to rest. Having Dargus talk down to him like that just made things worse.

"What?" One of the snipers asked.

Salim turned to the rest of the group and sighed loudly. "Just keep an eye out. They'll be here shortly. I'm sure."

Just then, Hama looked out to the distance and pointed something out. "Salim, they're coming!"

Salim looked over to see three armored delivery vehicles making their way to the base. The insignias on the front and sides were unmistakably the Eclipse's. Wow, he was actually right! He exhaled loudly. "(Damn, finally!)" He muttered relieved.

"It's about time," the Turian said agitated.

"Go help them unload," Salim told the group. "The sooner we do that, the sooner we go back in." The snipers would stick to their positions of course, but having three helping hands would be enough for the time being.

The vehicles pulled to a stop nearby as Hama and the other guards approached them. They seemed to be in better spirits now that they didn't have to wait any longer. Salim walked over to the snipers by the front entrance to radio Dargus...

until he heard something. As he looked up, one of the cameras had shorted out. It wasn't just a subtle electrical thing either. It was some sort of major malfunction. One of the snipers noticed this too and looked to Salim concerned. To draw more suspicion, the other camera on the opposite side of the wall also shorted out in similar fashion.

"What kept you guys so long?" Hama said as the vehicle doors opened.

"You better not have lost an ounce of product," the other human guard said. "That stuff pays for your freaking ugly armor!"

Salim turned back and saw the people exiting the vehicles. Something wasn't right. He caught a glimpse of the vehicles' sides. If he wasn't mistaken, he could make out mass effect slug holes? And huge dents all around? And then he saw what their armor looked like. Those were not Eclipse colors!

"They giving us the cold shoulder," Hama said as he turned back to Salim. "What? Did they take a piss on the-"

"HAMA!" Salim shouted and pointed to the armed Alliance soldiers.

Hama turned too late as three of the soldiers unloaded their weapons

on him, tearing through his shields quickly and mowing him down. Two other soldiers simultaneously popped the Turian guard in the head, while the other human guard had his weapon explode from an omni-tool tech power before being gunned down.

The snipers raised their guns to retaliate. From behind the Alliance soldiers, a loud boom sounded and the sniper to Salim's right took a shot in the eye. Salim ran as another shot took out the second sniper. Another shot, which was aimed much lower than the others, skimmed his shields near his legs as he dove behind a nearby large rock. He pressed his back to it as he scrambled to unfold his assault rifle.

"What happened to the goddamn cameras, Dalamar?" Dargus' voice crackled on Salim's comm.

"HELP!" He shouted back. "The Eclipse aren't Eclipse! It's Alli-"

Before he could finish, his body was wrapped in a blue biotic field and lifted into the air. With great force, he was slammed into the side of the base, dropping his gun from the impact. He struggled to move, but that field stuck him to the wall like glue. It was an ambush! An Alliance ambush!

More soldiers exited the vehicles as they surrounded him with their weapons raised. Some of them were dressed in traditional Alliance marine armor, but the others wore something much more sturdy and ugly looking. He saw the insignia and realized who they were. ODST's. Shit, he thought to himself. Dargus, their men and their new friends were going to have a hell of a fight very soonâ€¦

* * *

><p>Kyle Nolan followed behind his squad and the rest of Ralston's marines as they surrounded their target. He had tagged Salim Dalamar upon arrival once they had identified him from the comm. chatter. The man struggled to move, but Engelbrektsson's biotic field was too strong.<p>

La Rosa turned to Kyle with a nod. "This the drone we're looking for?"

"One of them, yes," Kyle responded. "Bag him."

Engelbrektsson released her biotic field, dropping Salim to the ground with a thud. Two of Ralston's marines rushed over, rolled him onto his front and detained him. With a heave, they dragged him to one of the Eclipse vehicles as he struggled to free himself from his cuffs.

Kyle had considered this operation luckier than expected. Shortly after their arrival on the planet's surface and the Tokyo moving out of any potential radar detection, Ralston had caught wind of an Eclipse supply delivery coming to the base. It only took a little tracking and a quickly improvised ambush to overpower them and follow their route to the base. It also helped lower the guards'â€¦well, guard once they arrived to eliminate them. And to top it off, they had already nabbed one of the three capture targets.

The fight wasn't over though. If Ralston's estimates were correct, they'd have to face a good twenty or thirty people inside the base outside of these guards. Hopefully Tangilanu jamming the cameras would help cover their numbers for the time being. Parker and his goons may be expecting an army or a small attack force like this. Either way, Kyle was going to be prepared.

"Tangilanu!" he said pointing to the front door.

"Already on it," Tangilanu replied as he ran to the door and opened his omni-tool. It would only take him a minute to decrypt the lock software on the door. Ralston's marines followed suit as Kyle's squad brought up the rear, checking for any other guards to pop their heads out.

"I totally nailed that Raptor before you, Engelbrektsson," La Rosa said as he swept the area with his Punisher sniper rifle scope.

"You'd be lucky to have pulled the trigger before I did," Engelbrektsson said as she swapped her Naginata sniper rifle for her Gorgon assault rifle. "I think your celebrity status is slowing you down."

"Well at least I kept practicing during the shore leave. How much did you spend on music again?"

"Does it always have to be a game for kills?" Resolme asked. "The guy's dead. It doesn't matter who shot first."

"Make your first kill, greenhorn, and then you'll understand," La Rosa said.

"If you guys are quite done, let's move it," Kyle said as he led them to the door. Tangilanu was still decrypting.

"Taking your sweet time?" La Rosa said.

"This isn't some cheap Peruvian door lock, amigo," Tangilanu said holding back some annoyance. "These guys got some top notch software."

"You could just slap some omni-gel on it," Resolme noted.

"What and cheat? Uh uh. I'm smarter than that," Tangilanu replied. After a few more taps, his omni-tool gave off a positive sounding beep. "Alright, we're in."

The door slid open with a hiss to reveal a darkened hallway inside. The lights had been forcibly shut off and all that was inside was some cargo crates, some Red Sand canisters, scattered weapons and a couple personal items. Kyle signaled Beckett and La Rosa to take the lead as they flicked the lights on their weapons on and charged in. After a quick check, Beckett gave the all-clear.

The rest of the group followed inside. Passing through the hallway, all they could hear was the hum of electricity. It was too quiet for Kyle's tastes.

This didn't escape Beckett's attention. "I think they're waiting for

us."

He nodded as he opened a channel to the group. "Be on your toes. They're expecting us."

"What kind of resistance should we expect?" Resolme asked.

"Probably more of the same," Beckett answered. "They'll have more cover to utilize inside, but I can't imagine they'll be much tougher."

"I dunno," Kyle said. "Ralston mentioned their merc payroll. If they have Eclipse at their disposal, it's possible they have a few heavy hitters waiting for us."

"You scared of the Eclipse or Blood Pack mercs?" La Rosa taunted.

"Not scared. I'm just cautious. There's got to be a few ex-soldiers amongst their ranks, so don't call them pushovers just yet."

"Alright. Just saying. I doubt they need an army to back them up."

Everyone got into a breach formation as they reached the door to the base's interior. Tangilanu checked the door for any traps before giving the all clear.

"Remember, the capture targets take priority," Kyle said to all the soldiers. "Keep your eyes peeled for Dargus Turatus and Garrett Parker. Eliminate any other hostiles, but keep them alive. Confirm."

The group winked green all at once.

"Good. Everyone inside now."

Tangilanu opened the door and took point with Engelbrektsson as the group followed. What they were greeted with wasâ€¦nothing? No people in sight anywhere. Just large metal cargo crates of all shapes and sizes scattered and stacked about the first and second level, with the second level open in the center. All the lights were shut off too. The doors all displayed a red sealed symbol on their pads. It was cold and quiet. These guys were ready to Kyle and his men.

As the last soldier entered, the door behind them closed shut and sealed. Tangilanu quickly tried to unlock it with his omni-tool.

"Shit," he said. "They've thrown up some new encryption code."

They were setting up a trap! Kyle winked red and everyone stopped in their tracks. "Don't wander off," he warned. "There's something wrong here. Stick close together."

A few of the people who wandered ahead walked backwards to rejoin the group as they kept their eyes peeled. Kyle flipped on his heat sensor and checked around. There were no immediate heat sources, but he knew that these walls were thick enough to hide people in the sealed

rooms. He was about to give an orderâ€¦

â€¦when he heard a creak above them. Everyone turned and shone their lights to the second floor, but nothing was there. Another creak was heard on the opposite side, prompting some other marines to shine their lights there.

"Did you see that?" One of Ralston's marines said.

"What?" Another asked.

"Everyone switch on your heat sensors," Kyle said. He hadn't seen what that marine had, but he did see the remnant of a heat source that had darted across the balcony and leapt off the railing to the main floor.

That was only confirmed as he heard another light thump nearby. Something was coming towards them. Some of the other marines heard the noise too, acting more jumpy and cautious than usual. Kyle lowered his Mattock rifle as his hand slid down to his hip and unfolded his pistol. Whatever the thing was, it was getting closer. He just needed one good glance. One trace of the enemy so he could-

Then he caught what he was looking for. It wasn't hard to miss. Behind Engelbrektsson's back, a Sangheili stood upright and cocked its arm back with an energy sword hilt prepared to stab.

With split second precision, Kyle hip fired over Engelbrektsson's shoulder and struck the shields around the Sangheili's neck, shattering them upon impact. The Sangheili gave a loud grunt and took a loud step backwards.

This drew everyone's attention immediately. Without missing a beat, Engelbrektsson and the four marines around her unloaded their assault rifles into the Sangheili. Without its shields up, the assailant howled as bullets tore through its torso. It collapsed with a loud thud onto the ground, purple blood spraying over its body and the floor.

The blood couldn't cover up the armor design of the assailant though. The shining blue and purple color scheme, the weaponry design, the insigniaâ€¦

"It's the Storm!" Resolme said as the lights suddenly switched back on, revealing four more Sangheili, a dozen Unggoy and six Kig-Yar emerging from a now unsealed room across the way. Two more doors unsealed from the upper floor, revealing the base's own merc forces, a mixture of humans, Turians and Salarians, preparing to fire.

"TAKE COVER!" Kyle shouted. His squad and the marines quickly scattered behind cover to avoid the volley of mass effect rounds and multiple colors of plasma flying at them. He rolled behind a crate next to Beckett and Resolme. The plasma and mass effect rounds scorched the edges of the crate above their heads. A few of Ralston's marines attempted to return fire, but the enemy's barrage was too intense for them to stick their heads out for long.

The last group Kyle expected to find on this syndicate's payroll was the Covenant Storm. A super cult masquerading as a mercenary group,

the Storm was the remnants of the old Covenant who would not let go of the fight. Though officially disavowed by their races' governments, they continued to gain followers amongst the disenchanteds, rebellious and young within the Sangheili, Unggoy, Kig-Yar and Mgalekgolo. They initially were dead set on continuing human extermination, but they've since resorted to working for hire like any other merc group. None of this information was beneficial to Kyle at the moment though.

A blue plasma shot scorched the ground next to Kyle's foot as he slid it out of the line of fire. He needed to flank these guys, but they had multiple levels of vantage points against his team. He peeked out and saw the enemy spreading out to trap them. He had to think quickly.

"Tangilanu, take the marines next to you and advance on the left side," he said over the comm. channel. "La Rosa, see if you can strike those bastards on the balcony. Engelbrektsson, give the other marines a cover barrier to help them advance." He turned to Beckett and Resolme. "You two follow me and cover my ass."

"Consider it covered," Beckett said as she and Resolme prepared to jump out.

Kyle pulled out two grenades from his belt with flash bang enhancements. He saw Tangilanu motion the other marines to follow, all the while keeping their heads down as they moved. Engelbrektsson shimmered with biotic energy as she prepared a barrier around the marines next to her. La Rosa dove past some stray plasma fire as he found a good vantage point. Time to strike!

He flung the grenades at two separate areas where the majority of the enemy was congregated. "Shield your eyes," he warned the team. Once the grenades had latched onto their respective spots, he pushed the detonation trigger.

The grenades exploded with a flash of light that stunned the mercs on the lower level. Kyle rushed from his cover with Beckett and Resolme behind him as they sprayed cover fire onto a group of Storm mercs. The Kig-Yar's handheld shields absorbed a lot of the fire, though Kyle and Beckett managed to cut down two Unggoy next to them.

He saw Tangilanu and his marines engage in a firefight against two Sangheili taking cover behind the cargo crates. Engelbrektsson engulfed herself and the marines near her in a biotic barrier as they rushed to a nearby staircase to engage the mercs on the upper levels. A boom sounded off as La Rosa picked off a Turian sniper on the balcony, drawing the surrounding mercs' fire his direction.

Kyle shot a concussion blast from his Mattock and knocked a Kig-Yar off its feet. This created a hole that Beckett filled with gunfire, taking out that bugged and the Kig-Yar to its right. With the upper balcony mercs shooting at La Rosa's position, Engelbrektsson lowered her barrier and her marines fired on them. Two mercs were cut down as the others scattered for cover. La Rosa rushed to a new vantage point and took down one of the Sangheili firing at Tangilanu. This gave Tangilanu the opening needed to overload the other Sangheili's shields and advance on its position. The Storm mercs started pulling back. This might actually work out.

Then a door opened nearby Tangilanu's position followed by two eerie roars. Kyle saw two lumbering blue armored masses emerge out of the room with fuel rod cannons ready. It wouldn't be a proper Storm encounter without these guys.

"Mgalekgolo!" Kyle said through the comm. Tangilanu and his marines turned just in time to see the new enemy aim at them. They rushed out of the way as two fuel rod blasts blew a hole at their last position. The Mgalekgolo's back spines bristled as the worms inside the armor forming their 'bodies' squirmed in anger.

Engelbrektsson and her marines fired at the Mgalekgolos, but they had already raised their arm shields in defense. Their armor was impenetrable once the blocked off their openings. One of Mgalekgolos fired at Engelbrektsson's group while the remaining Storm mercs advanced behind the other to chase Tangilanu.

"We're can't do anything with those bruisers firing at us," Engelbrektsson said as she and her team made their way up to the second level. The Mgalekgolo was attempting to ascend the staircase to pursue them.

"I can't get a clear shot at their openings," La Rosa also said.

Kyle looked to Beckett and Resolme. Neither Kyle nor Beckett had fought many Mgalekgolos in their time, but they knew that it was possible to take one down. It just required not being blown apart or stomped on in the process. He raised his Mattock rifle at the ready. Beckett nodded as she also prepped her Avenger.

"Tangilanu, lead that wormy bastard to us," Kyle said. "Engelbrektsson, give Resolme some cover so he can join up with you. Keep your fire focused on the mercs first but don't let the other bastard out of your sight. La Rosa, target the biggest merc threats first." He turned to Beckett again. Here goes nothing, he thought to himself.

"Go!" He shouted. Resolme ran out from cover and blind fired around the Storm mercs. Engelbrektsson and two other marines gave covering fire from the balcony as he frantically dodged plasma shots. Two more Unggoy and a Kig-Yar were gunned down in the process. Resolme finally made it to the staircase and took cover in the entrance. He still had an Mgalekgolo between him and the squad, but they would address that shortly.

Kyle and Beckett rushed out and navigated between the cargo crates until they managed to find an opening behind the pursuing Mgalekgolo. The Storm mercs following it then walked into view. A proper flanking position!

Kyle and Beckett sprayed rounds at the mercs, taking out most of the Unggoy and Kig-Yar in the group. The two Sangheili who remained turned to fire, but a well-placed shot from behind by La Rosa struck one of them in the chest. The remaining Sangheili ducked behind more crates, its shields shimmering as it activated its cloaking device. La Rosa would take care of him!

Once that was dealt with, Kyle and Beckett charged out and faced the Mgalekgolo's back. Kyle took one of his remaining grenades and flung

it at the opening in the beast's back armor. With a loud bang, the grenade exploded, spraying orange blood and bits of worms on the ground. Beckett sprayed the opening with some extra gunfire for extra measure. The beast roared as it turned back and fired a fuel rod blast at them. It skimmed above Beckett's head as they dove back to cover.

From the other side, Kyle heard Tangilanu's group open fire at the beast. "Come back and fight us, you bag of dicks!" Tangilanu shouted as they fired.

The Mgalekgolo's rage went into extreme as it swung its arm shield and smashed a smaller crate towards them. Tangilanu and one of the marines dodged it in time, but the other marine was grazed by the crate and knocked into a wall. He fell unconscious from the impact as the Mgalekgolo directed itself to shoot again.

Kyle barely heard Beckett telling him to wait as he ran ahead and primed a grenade. That marine was dead if he didn't move now! Up above him, he could hear Engelbrektsson and the remaining marines fighting the second Mgalekgolo with difficulty. The sooner he did this, the sooner he could help them.

He ducked and rolled as the Mgalekgolo swung its arm back towards him. With a heave, he flung the grenade on its now exposed neck and stood up to a run. The Mgalekgolo aimed its fuel rod cannon at Kyle and primed a blastâ€|

â€|and then it's head exploded. Orange blood and worms flew about as its helmet rolled off and onto the floor. The body collapsed onto the ground with a loud clang and the remaining worms spilled out from the openings. One down!

Kyle heard an explosion and saw one of the marines from upstairs fly over the railing, landing hard onto the floor. He went down and checked the marine's vitals. He was still alive, but that fall would put him out of commission for a while.

"We're getting clobbered out here!" Engelbrektsson shouted.

Kyle motioned to Tangilanu and the remaining marine with him. "Get up there and help them! We'll keep the wounded out of the way." Tangilanu primed his omni-tool and led the marine still on its feet to help fight the Mgalekgolo. Beckett went to drag the marine who fell over to the other wounded marine. La Rosa then emerged from behind another crate.

"La Rosa," Kyle said. "Did you catch that Sangheili?"

"No," La Rosa shook his head. "I thought you got him."

That was not what Kyle wanted to hear. Thankfully, it was then he felt an urgent prompting screaming in his head to turn around right that moment!

He turned just in time to see an energy sword swing down at him. He managed to fall away to the side, but not before the energy sword took off two of his synthetic fingers. He shouted in pain, even though it didn't hurt.

La Rosa fired at the assailant, narrowly missing its head as the Sangheili decloaked. With a loud roar, the Sangheili lifted its plasma rifle and fired as it ran to avoid La Rosa's and Beckett's returning fire. Kyle scrambled behind a crate as he heard their fighting, along with the continued fighting upstairs.

"Almost got it," Engelbrektsson said over the comm.

"Keep up the pressure," Tangilanu replied back as an explosion was heard.

A plasma shot scorched the edge of the crate Kyle hid behind. He wouldn't be able to grip his Mattock or two-handed weapons as securely without those extra fingers, so he folded the Mattock back up and took out his pistol again.

As he exited his cover to return fire, he saw La Rosa roll out of the way as the Sangheili swung its energy sword. La Rosa attempted to stand back up and 'no scope' shoot the Sangheili with his sniper rifle. However, the Sangheili kept up with its momentum to turn and kick La Rosa in the head, stunning him.

Kyle fired his pistol at the Sangheili, nicking its shields. The Sangheili retracted its energy sword and returned fire as it ran towards him. It then leapt onto a crate in one fluid motion and ran across the crates towards him. Kyle could sense its preparation for an aerial lunge!

He raced between the crates, narrowly avoiding the Sangheili's plasma as he shot back. He had to keep himself in a narrow space so it could get to him, but he would run out of cover soon. Out of his peripheral vision, he could see Beckett waiting just ahead with a now unfolded shotgun. All he needed to do was lead the bastard out so she could plug it.

However, before she could get a clear shot, the Sangheili leapt off the crates and tackled them both. Beckett was knocked onto her back, her shotgun sliding across the floor. The Sangheili then grabbed Kyle by the head and flung him against a wall with a loud slam. His pistol fell from his hands as the wind was forced out of his lungs.

The Sangheili rushed up and wrapped its large hand around Kyle's neck, lifting him up against the wall. He struggled and gagged trying to free himself, but the bastard had him. The Sangheili's energy sword surged to life and it gave an equivalent of a smile as it cocked its arm back. Kyle closed his eyes in anticipation.

Then he heard a grunt of pain. Which was weird because it wasn't his. He opened his eyes to see the Sangheili stopped mid-attack with its eyes wide open. Two prods of an energy sword stuck out from its chest. The sword sizzled as the Sangheili's purple blood dripped out between the cauterized parts of the wound.

It was Beckett!

The Sangheili dropped Kyle onto the floor as the prods were pulled out. Clutching its chest with its gun hand, the Sangheili attempted to recompose itself and turn to fight back. Beckett shouted as she swung her energy sword and sliced the Sangheili's head in half. Its body went stiff and collapsed onto the ground limply, its hands

twitching a couple more times before expiring.

Kyle then heard another loud roar and a huge crash as something fell on the balcony.

"It's down!" One of Ralston's marines shouted.

"Good work, everyone," Tangilanu replied back.

So the rest of the team had taken down the second Mgalekgolo! Kyle propped himself up, still coughing to catch his breath. Beckett was still standing in agro stance breathing hard as she retracted her energy sword. He noticed that their little chase had brought them back near the entrance of the building and that the Sangheili he helped take down earlier was now missing its own sword. Clever girl!

Beckett took a moment to relax before reaching out to Kyle. "Are you ok, Kyle?"

He took her hand as she lifted him up. "Yeah, I think so," he said shaking his head to calm the nerves. He caught her eyes spotting his missing fingers and moved his synthetic hand out of sight. "It's fine." He motioned for them to move. "We can't wait around here though."

The two of them saw La Rosa use a nearby crate to get back on his feet. His helmet was off as he rubbed his temples.

"Goddamn," La Rosa mumbled under his breath as he messed up his hair. "That was a ride." Kyle and Beckett attempted to help, but he lifted a hand to stop them. "I'm fine. Let's just keep moving," he said as he put his helmet back on.

After they collected their dropped weapons, the three of them quickly ascended to the second floor. The rest of the team had secured the area and were inspecting the other rooms nearby. The bodies of the mercs and the Mgalekgolo, were strewn about the floor, their blood mixing together with each other. Two of the syndicate mercs, a human and a Salarian, had surrendered and were being detained by two of Ralston's marines. It was not the neatest operation Kyle had done, but aside from the injured marines on the bottom floor, they had suffered no casualties. He hadn't lost a person under his command for at least three years now and he didn't plan to break that any time soon.

Kyle pointed to the two other marines. "Watch the wounded downstairs. We'll secure this floor," he said as they rushed back down the stairs.

He then saw Tangilanu, Resolme and Engelbrektsson attempting to decrypt a door on the other side. He motioned La Rosa and Beckett to follow as they rejoined their squad.

"Sitrep?" Kyle asked.

"A Turian and a human locked themselves inside during the fight," Tangilanu replied as he tapped on the omni-tool. "They threw up some crazy decryption code, but I can handle it."

"Any ID on Dargus or Parker?"

"Haven't seen their ugly mugs yet," Engelbrektsson replied. "So it's possible that it's them."

La Rosa adjusted the scope on his sniper rifle as Tangilanu broke the decryption.

"Don't fire unless I say so," Kyle said to La Rosa. "Our orders are to capture."

"Right, because they'll just roll over and surrender after all of this," La Rosa replied sarcastically.

Kyle motioned everyone to breach. It would only be two people, but he wouldn't take chances. There was always the threat of booby traps or surprise attacks when you least expect them.

With one last tap, the door slid open and the squad raised their weapons. At the end of the room were two people next to a terminal surrounded by crates, storage lockers, a large executive looking metal table and computers. One was a young blonde haired human who, in spite of holding a pistol trying to look tough, was shaking in his boots. The other was a particularly tall Turian who had just finished sabotaging the terminal with his omni-tool. He was unarmed and acting nonplused by the situation. Just a quick glance confirmed to Kyle that this was the Turian they were looking for, but not the human.

"Drop your weapon and put your hands to your heads!" Kyle shouted to the human.

"You will not be hurt if you surrender," Beckett added as the squad took a few steps into the room.

The merc took a step back and his hand continued to shake, but he would not lower his weapon. "Please, I don't want to die!" He pleaded.

"Listen to the scary men and women with big guns, kid," La Rosa said with his rifle trained at Dargus. "Throw your pistol down and put your hands to your head."

"We will not warn you again," Kyle pressured. "Drop it now or we will shoot."

The merc looked back to Dargus, who gave the most unpleasant look of 'I'm not helping you' Kyle had ever seen. The merc whimpered as he took in a deep breath. He then chucked the gun to the side and got on his knees with his hands over his head, still shaking and panicking.

"Move in," Kyle ordered.

La Rosa, Engelbrektsson and Resolme detained the merc as the rest of the squad surrounded Dargus. The Turian gave a snide look as he casually lifted his hands in the air.

"Here to slap me on the wrists for being a bad boy?" Dargus taunted them. "Or are you just going to shoot me too?"

"Can it!" Kyle shouted. The last thing he needed was a 'Raptor' being sassy with him. He pointed a finger at Dargus, only to realize it was the synthetic hand still missing two fingers. He switched hands and kept up his demeanor. "Where is Garrett Parker?"

"I have no idea who you're talking about?" Dargus denied.

Kyle gripped the collar of the Turian's armor. "Don't play games with me, Raptor. Tell me where your boss is now-"

"Or what? You and your monkeys will beat me into submission until I do? I know my rights and I have nothing to say to you about a 'Parker' in this or any other building." Dargus leered at Kyle. "And I'd watch the racism if I were you."

Kyle leered back. "Don't just think sabotaging your terminal will keep us from finding him. We're going to find him and grill all of your asses."

Dargus eyed Kyle's missing fingers and smirked. "Might do it quickly then. Wouldn't want you to lose another finger, would we?"

Kyle angrily tossed Dargus onto the floor. "Bag him," he said to Tangilanu and Beckett trying to hold back frustration.

As the two moved in to detain Dargus though, Kyle saw something was amiss. Dargus quickly looked up and glared at Kyle before looking over to where the rest of the squad was. Then he did the Turian equivalent of a smile as his hand reached for something at his hip. It wasn't a gun. It was too small. When Kyle realized what it was though, the Turian had already pressed a button on top of it.

A detonator!

Resolme had lifted the surrendering merc to his feet, while La Rosa and Engelbrektsson kept watch for anything suspicious. Directly behind the two of them, a green light suddenly switched to red between several crates. Kyle couldn't even see how many or what types of explosives had been put in place there but he had no time to react.

"Behind you!" He shouted to them.

Engelbrektsson responded the fastest as the explosives went off. She quickly put up a biotic barrier around her and La Rosa, but the force was too much for the barrier to absorb completely. The barrier shattered and flung the two of them into the metal table. Resolme was far enough that he wasn't hit by the fire, but was still knocked back with the merc onto the floor.

Then Kyle heard a struggle behind him. During the explosion, Dargus sprang to his feet and wrapped his arm around Beckett's neck as he forced her Avenger out of her hand. He fired at Tangilanu and Kyle one handed, forcing them to quickly take cover. He then pointed the Avenger to Beckett's head. He was about to execute her!

Kyle could care less about the consequences now as he emerged from behind his cover and pulled out his pistol. Beckett was dead if he didn't ice this asshole!

Which caught him off guard when he heard someone else shoot and nail Dargus between the eyes. Dargus' blood sprayed across Beckett's helmet as his eyes went cold and he collapsed still holding on to her.

Kyle looked around to see who did it. Tangilanu had also stood up to fire at Dargus, but his shotgun wouldn't have made that clean a shot. La Rosa was still trying to get back on his feet after the impact against the table. Engelbrektsson wasn't moving, which worried Kyle beyond the fact he knew she didn't fire.

He then turned back as he realized whom it was. Resolme was still lying on the floor with his arm outstretched and his pistol smoking. He breathed hard into his helmet as he tried to ease his adrenaline rush. The detained merc didn't dare move in fear of being shot next.

Resolme looked up to Kyle realizing what he did. "I was aiming for his arm!" He lamely gave as an excuse.

Beckett pulled Dargus' arm off of her and stood to her feet as she folded her Avenger back. "I'm fine by the way," she said annoyed to them all.

"Guys!" La Rosa said to the group. "She's not getting up!"

Everyone turned to see La Rosa pull off Engelbrektsson's helmet and attempt to wake her to no avail. Kyle rushed over with everyone except Resolme, who was too shocked to move but not enough to let the surrendering merc out of his sight.

"Is she still breathing?" Kyle asked.

"Yeah! Yeah, I think so," La Rosa said as he checked her pulse. Engelbrektsson's eyes were closed tight, but La Rosa heaved a sigh. "Yeah, she is." He felt a tinge of pain from his back and put a hand to it. "Shit!"

Kyle sighed and stood up. "Keep an eye on her La Rosa. Beckett, sweep this place clean. Tangilanu, salvage whatever you can from the terminal and any of the computers in this building. I want any indication of Parker's whereabouts find right now! And everyone keep an eye out for any more damn booby traps!"

As the others cleared to check the building, Kyle's comm. started crackling.

"Tokyo to ground team," Captain Ralston's voice called on the other line. "Tokyo to ground team. Report your status."

Kyle put his fingers to his comm. "Nolan here. The base has been cleared, but we have several wounded. Requesting evac back to the ship."

"Roger that. Are the targets secured?"

Kyle sighed. "Dalamar is in captivity along with several surrendering mercs. Parker doesn't appear to be in the building and Turatas is KIA."

"Shit. Alright, we'll send a shuttle down ASAP. Finish your business there quickly." Kyle was about to continue with his work when Ralston continued. "How the hell did all of this happen?"

Kyle sighed as he examined his damaged synthetic hand. "We'll fill you in when we get back. Needless to say, this is going to be tougher than we thoughtâ€¦"

* * *

><p>And...scene! Ok, well that was tense! The next chapter will be more of an intermittent segment bridging this and the next part of the story, but expect a few fun surprises coming your way very soon.

**Feel free to leave your reviews and comments here on the fanfic, stop by my Walking Dead fanfic A Life of Service (which I hope to update soon too) through my profile or come visit my new Tumblr page Zgamer Presents where I will update more details on my work as I write them.
>

**Ah...I forget how nice it is to keep writing these chapters!

>

9. State Your Desired Destination

My school work is in line, my work load has decreased, my room is clean and now my newest chapter is complete! And it only took three drafts to find one I truly felt comfortable with.

**A few mandatory plugs before we proceed. To read the original source story, check out DinoJake's The Last Spartan. A new chapter will be up for that story within the week and certain small details in this chapter, specifically the Codex entry, may tie into elements of his story!
>

**Also, whether you are a fan of Telltale's The Walking Dead Game or not, check out my other fanfic A Life of Service. A new chapter is still in the works and will hopefully be published soon.

>

**Also, some readers may notice changes happening to the chapters already published over the next few weeks. I am finally doing my drastic edit of the story to clean up grammar and excessive word use. The actual story and events of each chapter will remain the same though.
>

Finally, I have an occasionally updated Tumblr page, Zgamer Presents, that you can check out for updates on my fanfictions as well as other fun posts. I'm currently doing a month of music recommendations from film, television and gaming.

**And with that, let's get this bad boy in gear. We last left our

heroes finishing their attack on the Klensal base for the mission A Hostile Takeover. Engelbrektsson is unconscious, some people are still recoiling from the events and everyone is trying their best to keep the mission going. What will happen now?**

** Well, let's look into Engelbrektsson's mind first to see how she's doing...**

â€|

0702 Hours, February 27th, 2683

SSV _Tokyo_

Traveling to Hades Gamma Cluster Mass Relay

â€|

"_Engelbrektsson! Why have you not pushed that Warthog with your biotics?"_

"_It's too big, sir."_

"_What was that?"_

"_It's too b-"_

"_I heard what you said. Tell me Private: what branch of the Alliance did you volunteer for?"_

"â€| "

"_I asked you a question, maggot."_

"_ODST, sirâ€| "_

"_I can't hear you!"_

"_I volunteered for the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, sir!"_

"_Damn straight. Everyone, Make a note on what Private Engelbrektsson said. She just remembered that she joined the strongest military force in the galaxy, not some pussy whipped Unggoy combat unit."_

"â€| "

"_And we're not just regular soldiers. We are biotics: the ODST's backbone and shield. We are the offense and defense your average Alliance soldier can never be. When the brass say jump, we jump. When they say block, we block. And if we fall, they fall. There will be no room for incompetence or failure. And there is certainly NOTHING too big to push. Now who here thinks they can move this?"_

"_I can, sir."_

"_Me, sir."_

"_Let me at it, sir."_

"_Good boys, but I don't want you to. Because none of us are leaving until Engelbrektsson flings this bitch onto the target."_

"_But-"_

"_THATâ€¦ISâ€¦ANâ€¦ORDER! You think the puss sucking scum of the galaxy will be any lighter? They're big, they're mobile and they will kill you long before you can complain about their heavy asses. It's a short trip to the morgue, maggot."_

"â€¦"

"_Do you understand me?"_

"_Yâ€¦yes, sir."_

"_Good. Now push that Warthog before I have one of these fine men mount its turret and raise the stakes."_

"â€¦"

"_I SAID PUSH THAT GODDAMN PIG NOW!"_

Engelbrektsson's eyes shot open and she sat up sharply, only to be greeted by surging pain down her spine. The world tilted and wobbled as light flooded her vision. She closed her eyes and mentally played some Chopin piece she memorized. Music like that helped her when she had headaches and as the area around her slowly stopped moving, it seemed to help here too.

She slowly opened her eyes and let her vision adjust to her new surroundings. It was cold here, but more because she was now out of armor than it was actually chilly. The walls and scenery became clearer, with the unmistakable logo of the Alliance plastered all around. The low hum of electricity and working machinery echoed in her ears before tuning out. And she was lying on a moderately comfortable medical bed, though to be fair any medical bed outside of the Citadel's Huerta Memorial would be less comfortable. Well she wasn't on Klensal anymore, so this had to be the _Tokyo's_ medbayâ€¦or at least a convincing reconstruction. She preferred to believe the former.

She kept a skeptical eye on the medical equipment monitoring her condition as she felt something unusually hot behind her neck. Reaching her hand back, she came across a cord stuck to where her biotic implants were installed. Greatâ€¦she overexerted her amp again. Dr. Shattuck had put an inhibitor to keep her biotics in check, though she could feel the excess energy coursing through her veins. Being out of sync with biotics at her level was dangerous, so she understood the precautionsâ€¦but still sucked.

She gently laid down with a sigh, mentally piecing together what happened on Klensal. The fight with the mercenaries. The Storm appearing out of nowhere. Dargus' office. The lieutenant shouting at her. The explosionâ€¦

â€¦and not being able to block it. She groaned. Those explosives weren't even that high grade and she still couldn't match their intensity. Was she just careless? She thought she had taken the

lieutenant's warning seriously. Now she was stuck here doing nothing.

Could she possibly feel worse?

"The beast awakethâ€|" a familiar voice teased.

â€|yupâ€|

She turned to see La Rosa sitting on the side of the bed next to her. He was also out of armor and admiring the two arena combat champion rings looped through his dog tags. They were definitely pretty, but him showing them off so often had diminished their appeal. He diverted his attention from the rings enough to smile snidely at her.

"Oh, come on now. You know you're happy to see me," he teased as he put his dog tags under his uniform's collar.

"Thrilledâ€|" she replied miffed. "How long was I out for?"

"Pshâ€|I don't know. A few hours?"

"Geezâ€|"

"Yeah. The lieutenant had planned your funeral and everything too. Resolme was going to give a great eulogy too. Looks like we've disappointed a lot of guests," he joked.

'Assholeâ€|"she mumbled to herself.

The medbay entrance hissed open as another familiar person entered. This was a more welcomed presence though.

"Harmony," Dr. Wendy Shattuck said as a responsive chirp sounded from the ship's VI. "Transmit relevant medical data for all patients within the last hour."

The equipment responded and her now active omni-tool flooded with data that Engelbrektsson couldn't read. She tried leaning over to see them, but her pain expanded to her lower back and legs.

"There's no need for further injuries, Sergeant," Dr. Shattuck said to her. "Relax."

Engelbrektsson sighed as she looked back to her. "Tell me straight, doc."

"Very well," Dr. Shattuck said as she approached Engelbrektsson's side while reading her data. "The military grade explosives you attempted to block overloaded your amp with excessive biotic feedback. The lack of burns on your skin means your barrier held long enough, but Harmony is still analyzing for neural damage. None has been found so far."

Okâ€|so that was slightly comforting. "Are my biotics ok then?"

"I'm afraid not," Dr. Shattuck continued as Engelbrektsson noticed a machine watching her every movement, which was totally not creepy... "The inhibitor is keeping your biotic nodules in check, but without a

repairs or a replacement amp, you will be out of commission until further notice."

And that was not so comforting." "What?"

"I'm sorry, but we will need a new amp from the Alliance's Citadel office to meet your requirements. When this will happen is uncertain."

The doctor's omni-tool beeped and she skimmed over the new information provided. "Your physical injuries are more manageable though. Colliding into that table, along with other physical trauma, has caused intense bruising around your legs and lower back, as well as several cracks on both femurs. The medigel will take care of that, but we will need a couple days of healing before we can discuss combat readiness."

Engelbrektsson was not happy hearing this. She attempted to channel some frustration out towards La Rosa. "And what's the celebrity's problem?"

"Minor back injuries, bruising and head trauma," the doctor replied without missing a beat.

"Yeah," La Rosa said rubbing his temples. "That Sangheili bastard kicked like a mule!"

"So is he going to be unavailable for combat too?" Engelbrektsson asked.

The doctor shook her head. "Not as long. The corporal's helmet took most of the blow, though I'll review Harmony's data for any concussion symptoms before making a definitive statement. Other than that, he should be on his feet as soon as possible."

La Rosa crossed his fingers. "Here's hoping whatever she said hasn't messed up my aim."

"Well it was still shit anyway," Engelbrektsson replied.

"And when was the last time you made a headshot?" He shot back. "The greenhorn just made his first without even trying."

Engelbrektsson grumbled as she glared back at him.

The doctor continued on with her business, tuning out their conversation, before closing her omni-tool. "I'll need both of you to stick around a little longer before I decide what to do next. The others need more of my attention at the moment." And with that, she left the two ODST alone.

Engelbrektsson was not happy about being cooped up in a medbay for the next few days. It would throw off her usual biotic training and make her rusty, which wouldn't be good for anyone. And she'd miss out on nailing the guys that put her here. Not like they knew where those pricks were hiding anyway.

"What a mess," La Rosa muttered out loud.

She didn't plan to respond, but he was speaking her thoughts. "Yeah,

tell me about it."

"Wasn't planning to," La Rosa said looking at the ceiling as he reclined back on his bed. "Damn Alliance and their intel"

"You knew what you signed up for," Engelbrektsson replied. "The arena is long behind you, hero."

La Rosa stared annoyed at her and pointed over her shoulder. "You see that?"

Engelbrektsson turned to see Dr. Shattuck tending to the other two wounded marines from the mission. However terrible her injuries felt, those guys had it worse. Both wore extensive braces and bindings around their limbs amongst the tubes and machines monitoring their vitals. Falling off a railing and being hit by a crate would that, even with medigel to help.

"That could have been avoided if the goddamn intel warned us about the Storm," La Rosa said.

Engelbrektsson looked back to him. "It's not like we have psychics, hombre."

"It's the 27th century," He said frustrated. "All our advances in technology and we still have to expect surprises like that? I'm not asking for psychics. I'm asking for some goddamn competence!"

He seethed some more before exhaling and rubbing his face with his hands. This was uncharacteristic of him. He was usually chill with whatever happened, but his current expression was one of confusion, frustration and nervousness? Did that kick to the head knock some sense loose?

"Did you think you were going to die back there?" Engelbrektsson asked half teasing and half curious.

He hesitated. "I don't know" Did you?"

She took a moment to think about it. To be fair, she hadn't intended to answer her own question. "Well" I was out for a while"

The conversation paused for a minute as neither felt confident admitting what they already knew.

"Do you ever wonder" you know?" La Rosa mumbled.

She turned back to him. "You're going to have to finish your sentences if you want an answer."

He sat up more fully. "I was getting to it," he said clearing his throat. "I'm saying" do you think anyone would really care if we died?"

That question sucked the air out of the room. And here Engelbrektsson thought she would just be resting and listening to music. Now they were waxing existential.

"I don't think about it much," La Rosa continued. "We never had to worry about that in the arena. All that safety shit made death next

to impossible." He slumped his hands onto his thighs. "Now it's live fire and real world danger. It's fun the first few timesâ€|and then it starts to suck."

She leaned forward more, or as much as her wounds would let her. "So why do you keep fighting?"

"I dunno," he clearly lied with a shrug. "Probably just sheer stupidity."

"You wouldn't be the first," she replied half-jokingly. She didn't feel like calling out his lie right then. "So was it the head kicking that made you think that?"

He shook his head. "No...but that didn't help."

That peaked her curiosity. "Well, what then?"

He sighed, clearly choosing his words carefully. "It was after the explosionâ€|when you didn't wake up."

She raised her eyebrows in shockâ€|

â€|which he must have expected. "Don't expect me to pour out any feelings for you here, because there aren't any," he replied coyly. "Butâ€|after we crashed into the table, I was pretty sure I broke my spine. If I wasn't dead, then maybe crippled." He rubbed his back, probably unconsciously triggering a pain reaction. "Then I woke up. I was only out for a second, but you weren't. It made me think aboutâ€|you know, what if you had actually died? Or what if it was me? What if I was already dead and I was futilely trying to pull you away from some other side?"

"But you don't believe in a god or afterlife."

"I know, which only made it weirder..." he said unable to finish the thought.

She tried lightening the mood. "You know that we would miss you if you died."

"Liarâ€|"

"And you have your fans who would miss you."

"For how long though? I mean, yeah I might get my name on the Citadel Sports Network headlines for a few days, but then what? They'll just move on to the next big player or game and then I'm done. No friends, no family, no nothing to remember me. All because I might have been one day short of doing something significantâ€|"

He let out a big sigh...and then said something else that caught her off guard. "And...before I forgetâ€|wellâ€|thank you."

She didn't quite know what he was apologizing for, as she was still being impressed he had registered this much depth already. "â€|for what?" She asked.

He rolled his eyes, more annoyed at himself than her. "If you hadn't put up your barrierâ€|yeah, you know."

A smirk crept on Engelbrektsson's mouth. "Are you seriously thanking me for saving your lifeâ€|after everything else I've done to save your ass?"

"Those other times weren't big deals," he said slowly reverting to his cocky demeanor. "And don't get used to it. Consider it a catch all 'thank you' for any I won't say in the future."

She groaned inside. And she was just starting to respect thoughtful La Rosa too.

He stretched his arms out and gave a mock yawn. "Wellâ€|I'm bushed. Some of us need our beauty sleep." he said as he rolled to the side facing away from her. "Wake me if there's a fireâ€|" And with that, he tuned everything out to try and sleep.

Engelbrektsson just for a few more awkward seconds reflecting on what happened. La Rosa apologizing? Talking about death in a serious light? Not cracking jokes back to back? The others wouldn't believe her even if she tried explaining it.

Still, what he said did linger in her mind. She wondered how her family would react if she had died. She would have a proper funeral. There would be wailing and gnashing of teeth. She would have a nice eulogy from her uncle and cousins. Her absence wouldn't be unfelt.

La Rosa was different though. Yeah he was a celebrity, but he wasn't kidding about the 'no family' thing. He didn't talk about it much and she didn't blame him. The lieutenant had filled her in on some of the details a while back and they weren't pretty. So maybe this break from his usual 'jock talk' was good for that. She figured every soldier should have their introspective moment at some time, so maybe this was La Rosa'sâ€|

â€|but it wasn't hers! She opened her omni-tool and tuned her comm. to her music selection, while keeping a channel open for any incoming messages. The soothing sounds of 23rd century synth rock pumped into her ears as she rested on her pillow. Maybe this is why she was so into music. Talking to other ODST was just weirdâ€|

â€|

Beckett strolled down the corridor alone as she eyed her destination. It had been a while since Kyle disappeared after the Tokyo left Klensal. Hell, she hadn't seen anyone from the squad lately. Engelbrektsson and La Rosa were in the medbay, Tangilanu was on the bridge decrypting some recovered files and Resolme had slinked off to some unknown corner of the ship. It wasn't good for them to be split up this long, especially when they were still on duty. However, she had a good idea where to find Kyle at least.
>With a quick turn, she entered their section of the crew quarters. In the back of the room, she spotted Kyle sitting at the center table tinkering with something. As she got closer, she saw a familiar small tool kit on the chair to his left. His damaged hand and its severed fingers were on the chair to his right while he attached the replacement hand he kept in his footlocker. It was larger than his usual version, but it performed all the same functions. His struggle to attach it showed how long it had been since he last used

it.
Beckett groaned and slumped her shoulders. He should ask the technicians for help. They'd at least get it done faster.

>He finally acknowledged her presence with a casual glance before continuing his work. "Take a holo. It'll last longer," he said as he disconnected a misplaced wire.
Beckett crossed her arms, holding back her irritation. "Having trouble?"

>"I've done it before," he replied as he finished and put on his glove. "You know I can take care of my own damn problems." He sat up and tested the appendages.
"You're not a technician," Beckett said.

>"Hasn't stopped me yet," he said as he finished checking the hand. With everything looking good, he placed the damaged hand, fingers and tool kit in his footlocker. He then met Beckett's glare and sighed. "I'll give it to them later, ok? He said. "Hell, you can cut diamond with those eyes..."
"I'll take that as a compliment," she said as she uncrossed her arms. She didn't like talking to him like this, but he needed it. Every man had his faults, but it didn't justify being a grouch. "Heard anything from Tangilanu?"

"If you haven't, I haven't," he replied moving to the door. "We should find out."

Well at least they were getting back to work. She followed him as they headed to the bridge, passing by other soldiers talking and going about business. Everything on Klensal had made everyone extra busy. Not finding Carter or 'Seva was a bummer and the involvement of the Storm only complicated things. Now they were all scrambling to find a new lead and if Tangilanu couldn't trace the data they scavenged, it would be a bitch to find the other base.

And on top of that, recent news of the Geth invading Eden Prime had made everyone a little extra antsy. It's not everyday a sentient race of AI's unseen for over three hundred years nearly decimate one of Humanity's most prosperous colonies!

As they walked, Beckett noticed Kyle rubbing his hand again. This caught his attention too and he tried hiding it out of view while avoiding eye contact. She knew he was thinking about THAT particular memory again.

"Kyle..." She said trying to start a conversation."Do you want to ta-"

"No," he quickly interrupted.

Ok...the nice approach wouldn't work this time. She popped a kink in her shoulder as she remembered something on Klensal.

"Synthetic hands don't hurt when they lose fingers," she said. He didn't respond, but she had his attention. Good! "You know, when the Storm soldier attacked."

"I remember..." He said annoyed.

"Well stop remembering," she said more sternly. "It's only hurting you."

He breathed hard out his nose as he kept rubbing his hand. "We didn't catch them," he said referring to Parker and 'Seva.

"No, we didn't," Beckett said. "But we hit them hard. And none of our men died."

"Engelbrektsson and La Rosa-"

"Are fine. They're ODS'T. It takes more than that to bring us down." Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him stop rubbing his hand but he still kept it hidden. She continued. "And the other marines will live too. Besides, if it was anyone else leading them, we wouldn't have even made it this far."

"Did we already reach the flattery part of this talk?" He said.

"Do you always shoot down genuine compliments?" she replied. The fact he kept silent meant she was good to keep going. "We're alive...Whatever you take from that is up to you, but I'm grateful for another day of living. Means I can get back up and hunt those bitches down wherever they're hiding," she said partly for him but also for herself. "Plus, I think a little Law of Moses can be enacted for your loss."

She could see him chuckle as he lowered his hands back to his sides. She was getting better at this. He had too much responsibility to be bothered by pestering thoughts. It's not like she was a psychologist, but being around soldiers like him long enough meant she knew how they ticked.

Before they entered the bridge, Kyle added one more point. "We're not alive because of me," he said. This confused her a little before he clarified. "If you hadn't stabbed that Sangheili..." He fumbled thinking of the right thing to say.

"You're welcome, big guy," she answered with a smile.

"I'm still saying 'thank you,'" he said as the bridge door opened. "But I'm never challenging you to an energy sword duel now. Even if you paid me!"

She laughed as they entered the bridge. "You wouldn't have stood a chance anyway, quitter."

The bridge bustled with activity as various people worked on multiple terminals. Most of it was general communications and maintenance work, but there were several people specifically analyzing files from the Klensal hard drives. Behind her, the Galaxy Map was on display with two engineers mapping out coordinates on different systems.

She spotted Tangilanu discussing several open files with two other engineers and they joined their conversation.

"Anything good to report?" Kyle asked him.

Tangilanu shook his head. "Nothing conclusive, sir," he said pointing at a few details on the terminal as the other engineers continued their work. "Harmony and the other techs are doing their best, but these guys covered their tracks thoroughly. Triple encrypted extranet IP addresses, vague code names, multiple password algorithms. It's almost Shadow Broker level shit."

Algorithms? That was definitely over Beckett's head.

Kyle crossed his arms as he looked over the files, clearly not understanding them better than she did. "That's giving them too much credit."

"That's why I said 'almost'," Tangilanu noted.

"Why would they put that much protection on their data?" Beckett asked.

"Amateurs wanting to play the big leagues," Tangilanu replied. "And they're not doing a bad job. Must be a pro hacker working for them."

"Or at least a competent cyber warfare technician," Kyle added.

"Or a retired slash rogue STG operative," Beckett also added.

"Even so," Tangilanu said as they walked to the Galaxy Map. "The point is that we have a few trails to pick up on, but without more specific information it's just a wild goose chase."

"What kind of trails?" Kyle asked.

"Just some stray message destinations," Tangilanu replied. "We tracked a few to their extranet distribution buoys."

"You said the IP's were encrypted," Beckett said.

"Yes, but that's just for the specific server and recipient," he said as he nodded to the engineers at the Galaxy Map's terminal. "We were able to feel out the data bundles they were sent to before they were redirected."

"Which was like finding a needle in an Elcor sized haystack," one of the Galaxy Map technicians noted.

"Exactly," Tangilanu said as the technicians added some data to the terminal. "And how many galactic clusters did we trace the messages to?"

The second technician finished crunching his numbers and red dots shot out over the right side of the map. Amongst the systems they landed on were the Attican Beta, the Maroon Sea, the Gemini Sigma, Voyager, Sentry Omega and Kepler Verge clusters.

"About six," the second technician said. "And that's not including the systems."

Beckett understood now. With so many messages trafficked in and out on a minute-by-minute basis, their leads could disappear faster than it would take to start searching. "Has Harmony been able to communicate with the buoys for help?" She asked.

"That's outside her computation power," Tangilanu said. "Dumb A.I.'s...you know."

Kyle nodded as Beckett saw him thinking over something. "It still doesn't make sense," he said.

"What? Harmony's limits?" Tangilanu asked.

"No...well, yes, but no," he replied not wanting to go down that rabbit hole. He eyed the Hades Gamma cluster on the Galaxy Map. "What did these bastards hope to achieve by getting everyone killed? Dargus had to know it was a losing fight."

"You should know a suicide mission better than anyone," a voice behind them said.

Everyone turned to see Captain Ralston enter the bridge, prompting a group salute.

"At ease," Ralston said waving off their salutes and approaching the Galaxy Map.

"Suicide mission, sir?" Beckett asked.

"Absolutely," Ralston said. "Everything in your report points to it, but I doubt everyone at the base knew that was the case."

"So Dargus expected everyone to die rather than surrender?" Tangilanu asked.

"No, I think he was hung out to dry and refused to die in a jail cell," Ralston replied glancing to Beckett. "Why would he try executing her after the battle was lost?"

"Because he's an idiot," Kyle replied. Beckett felt good hearing that.

"Maybe so, but even idiots would strive for self-preservation. Resolme acted rashly in killing him, but Dargus set it up too easily," Ralston said thinking it over. "No, I think he knew his plan before we even arrived."

Beckett thought about that, seeing the Captain's point. "He was stranded on a backwater planet with no means of help. If he told his bosses we were coming..."

"...they probably told him how boned he was," Tangilanu added.

"So how come the others surrendered?"

"Because they're not crazy," Ralston said. "Most of the hired muscle were locals to their system. Doubt any of them have even heard the big bosses talk let alone seen their faces. Dargus had a lot of dirt though, so it'd be a shitty legal situation even without what his bosses dumped on him."

"So Dalamar was the unlucky one?" Kyle asked.

"Yup," Ralston said as he leaned against the Galaxy Map railing. "Which leads to our current situation. The other people we detained wouldn't know the first thing about Parker and 'Seva's whereabouts. So if we want to save a lot of trouble, we need to make Dalamar talk." He looked to Kyle. "What do you think would work?"

"Is that an actual question or an invitation to find out?" Kyle asked.

"Take it how you will, but I'm glad you can read between the lines."

Beckett raised an eyebrow. Ralston was going to have Kyle interrogate Dalamar? He could do it, but she had to wonder why Ralston wouldn't do it himself.

"What are my parameters?" Kyle asked.

"What's legal," Ralston replied. "Get in his head, use your facts wisely, intimidate, but watch your step. The last thing we need slowing us down is red tape."

Beckett saw Kyle think over the situation. This wasn't a Spectre operation, so they still had to play by Alliance and Council rules. One slip up could get them clamped down by ONI or some other internal investigation.

After a few moments, Kyle nodded. "Alright...give us a room and I'll do it."

Ralston stood up and gave a firm pat to Kyle's shoulder. "I know you will," he said as he looked to Beckett. "Beckett and I will be waiting outside if anything happens." He pointed to Tangilanu and the technician. "Keep a channel prepped. Whatever ship is in the system Dalamar names, I want them hailed immediately."

That order surprised Kyle and Beckett. "Huh?" Kyle asked.

"We're not going alone this time," Ralston replied. "We're short three men, we have Geth on our doorstep and you can bet we'll face stiffer resistance this time around. I've already talked to Command and it's final."

Beckett understood and nodded. "Right, sir."

"I want you two down at the interrogation room in five minutes," Ralston said to her and Kyle. "And Kyle..." He added looking directly at him. "Make this quick."

"Faster than Slipspace, sir," Kyle said affirmatively.

"Good. Dismissed," Ralston said as he talked into his earpiece heading to the ship's elevator.

So, they were going through with the interrogation. Dalamar wouldn't be very eager to talk to them, but Beckett hoped this would get resolved soon. There were bigger things to focus on than drug traffickers...

...

Kyle popped his shoulders and rolled his neck as he rode down the elevator. It had been a while since he had interrogated someone...years even. It wasn't usually his job, since they would usually transfer prisoners to ONI or some other Alliance official to be processed. They were on a time crunch though, so the sooner they dealt with this, the sooner they could crush this syndicate.

He closed his eyes and tried putting himself in a focused state. He was still...a bit steamed about the Sangheili chopping his fingers off, but he knew Asha would guilt him again if he didn't calm down. That woman was more concerned dealing with his problems than he was. Didn't she have a father on death's door weighing on her mind?

Ok, he realized that was out of line. Whatever the case, being upset wouldn't help the interrogation.

Yet he couldn't help but recall buried memories the more he tried dodging around Klensal. And these memories would always bring him back to Shanxi. It felt like everything brought him back to Shanxiâ€|

The elevator chimed and the doors slid open. Well, he would have to postpone his deep introspective thoughts for another day.

He exited the elevator and spotted Beckett, who closed her omni-tool to talk. "Ralston's waiting in the next hall," she said pointing to the nearest door. "You ready?"

"I could think I'm ready all I want," Kyle said as he approached the door. "Doubt I'll ever actually 'be' ready."

"Just answer the question," She asked sternly.

He sighed. "Yesâ€|"

"Good. That wasn't so hard."

Kyle looked to her eyes. "You don't have to keep watching out for me."

"Somebody has to," she replied crossing her arms. "'Better to be watched by a friend's eyes than an enemy's scope.'"

He was pretty sure that was his quote. Glad to know someone was paying attention to those! He opened the doors and turned to her with a smirk. "Thanksâ€|"

She smiled back as she followed him. "Anytime, big guy."

They made their way down the hall to see Ralston waiting outside a room with two guards.

"You review the data I sent?" Ralston asked Kyle as he lowered a data pad he was carrying and moved away from the now opening door.

"As much as I could," Kyle replied.

"Alright then. You know the drill. Do what it takes to make him talk, but be quick about it," Ralston said handing him the data pad. "The longer we wait, the more time those dick holes have to do damage."

"Yes sir," Kyle said as he walked in the room and the door slid shut.

The room was dimly lit inside, more for aesthetic purposes than a fault with the lights. In the middle was a table with two chairs.

Sitting in the chair opposite from the door was Salim Dalamar, with his hands restrained onto the surface with tight cuffs. He wore a sour scowl that masked regret and intense frustration, none of which were surprising.

It was strange seeing the man out of his armor though. His skin was a darker black than Kyle expected and he was very thin. His lips didn't close all the way when at rest, revealing his top row of slightly yellow teeth. His balding head reflected the light almost at Kyle's eyes, possibly to distract from his slightly larger than usual forehead. He was a deceptively intimidating individual.

Not enough for Kyle though. He made his way to his chair, using the brief time in the shadows to take one more relaxing breath. Show time!

"Salim Dalamar?" Kyle asked for protocol's sake.

Salim refused to answer as he looked out into the darkness.

"Alright, let's try something else," Kyle said as he lifted Ralston's data pad. "Do you know why you're in this room?"

Salim still didn't answer.

Kyle pulled up an arrest record on the data pad. "As it stands, we're looking at drug trafficking, slave trading, extortion, counts of murder and other charges you may or may not be directly tied to. Depending on your testimony, you may be able to lower the charges from first to third degree. Maybe even an accessory chargeâ€|"

Salim continued to remain silent.

"I can imagine how you feel. A few hours ago, you were wallowing in that pit doing whatever people like you do when you're not hocking drugs and flesh. Now you have a rather unpleasant future facing you." Kyle was feeling more confident the more he spoke. Memories of his own interrogation and counter-interrogation training kicked in, fueling his words. He leaned forward and continued. "It sucksâ€|it really does. How much it will suck, however, depends on you."

"I'm not telling you anything," Salim finally said, still not looking at Kyle.

"Famous first words," Kyle replied. "I feel you may reconsider."

"And why is that?"

"Because you'll hear what I have to say and accept that I'm here to help you."

"Noâ€|you're notâ€|" Salim said turning to Kyle directly with that same harsh scowl. "You're going to murder. Murder, destroy and ruin the lives of other people, just so your bosses can continue dominating the galaxy."

Kyle was amused by this response. "This from a man who helped dope up and sell people to the Batarians."

Salim leaned forward to Kyle, still unable to move his restrained hands. "Do you know business, soldier man?"

Kyle shook his head. "I know how to spend money and not go into debt. That's about it."

"Yeahâ€¦ just a stupid jarhead like everyone else," Salim sneered. "You know what people do to make good business? Trick stupid people." He tried moving his hands to illustrate his point, but to no avail. "Everyone is looking to escape a problem. They don't have this. They need this. They want to leave this. Sometimes they need a little extra help. It's not always legal, but they'll do what it takes because they need it now. They know what they're dealing with. Anything else that happens after is their own fault."

Kyle held back his surprise from this boldness. "So you're ok subjecting them to whatever the Batarians wish to do?"

"Like I said, they know what they're dealing with. They think we're stupid, like we won't find them if they can't pay us back. We're not. We take back what they owe us, one way or another. Whatever the Batarians do after is fair game."

Kyle leaned back in his chair. "So is this a formal confession?"

Salim looked down to the table. "It doesn't matter. You'll make one up anyway."

"That's not true."

Salim slowly shot back his glare. "Noâ€¦ I know how you government people work. It's a blame game. You don't want to fix your problems, so you dump them on everyone else. You use all the same dirty tricks, but you call them 'sanctioned.' Meanwhile, people making an honest living get squashed by your shit because it stinks too much for you to handle."

Kyle sighed with amusement. "If what you're saying was true, which it isn't, what problems do you think 'we're' shitting on your shoulders?"

"That you're all corrupt! You seek peace with the galaxy, but you suppress the innocent and weak to do it. You bully the other races to do your bidding without giving anything back. You put taxes and limitations where none are needed. You let people die in your own ranks without a second thought. And you are damn liars! The galaxy would be better off without the Alliance and you know it!"

"Empty words from a hypocrite."

"And an empty defense from a murderer!"

Salim's argument was certainly weak enough to poke holes into, but the way he said 'murderer' opened a more useful weak point. He crossed his arms and cocked a curious eyebrow. "What was your friend's name?"

Salim hesitated but didn't answer.

"The one on Klensal? Who did we kill that you were close to?"

There was still no answer, but Kyle could see the agitation rising.

He opened a new file on the datapad. "I can go through every person we identified until you tell me—or you can cut out the middle man. It'd be a lot easier for both of us."

Salim's fingers scraped against the table and his lips closed into a sharp frown. Kyle just needed to hammer this home. He scrolled down the list to a specific name that was highlighted.

"Well, because we live in this century, I already know who it is. Your comm. chitchat helped there," he said as he started reading the file. "Let's see...Hama Mohammed Fahrin. Born July 14, 2659 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia to Omar and Kefaya Al Shammari. Changed his name in 2675 when he started working for various crime rings operating in and around Omega. Had two brothers and three sisters, two of which died during the Elysium Blitz with military honors. Graduated in military—"

"You don't know my friend!" Salim barked at Kyle with balled up fists. A vein on his forehead throbbed as his scowl intensified and he breathed hard, venomous breaths.

Neither of them talked for a minute as Salim's breathing slowed down. Kyle continued to be amused, but he knew that a nerve was hit. Good!

"So—that's why," Kyle said to break the silence.

Salim looked away again. "Don't pretend you care, asshole," he mumbled. "How many people have you killed just because your bosses said so?"

Kyle wasn't about to get sucked into this rabbit hole, so he shifted gears. "You're right—I could give two shits about the people I killed down there. That's just part of the job. But you wouldn't have given two shits about killing my men either, so I'd say our potential for being bastards is evenly matched."

As Salim continued stewing with his internal anger, Kyle opened a special file. Now it was time to redirect this rage. "Of course, it wouldn't have ended that way if your bosses didn't abandon you."

Salim hesitated for a moment but he didn't relent his anger. "You caught us off guard. What could have 'my bosses' done?"

"Well, they could have warned you that we were coming—or more particularly—" Kyle paused, savoring the reveal as he opened up the file. "Dargus could have told you they weren't going to help."

"What do you mean?" Salim said confused.

The bait was taken!

"Sorry, I should stop being so vague," Kyle said with a smirk as he

scrolled through the file to a series of linked messages. "We found a lot of messages on Klensal, most of which Dargus tried to destroy. However, there was a conversation we found on his personal account that wasâ€¦interesting." He slid the data pad to Salim. "Care to take a look?"

Salim glanced down to the data pad and back to Kyle a few more times before succumbing to his curiosity. He leaned forward, straightening the pad with his cuffed hands, and scrolled down the linked messages. The more Salim read, the more his anger faded. In its place were concern, confusion and frustration. He glanced back up to Kyle as he most likely reached the final message. "This is a fake."

"Afraid not," Kyle said assuredly, "We verified the sending address and it's most certainly Dargus'. It's all directly taken from the source we downloaded from."

Salim glanced back down at the message, then back up again quickly. "Iâ€¦I don'tâ€¦" He stammered as he searched for something to say.

Kyle lifted a hand to stop him. "There's nothing to say. Your bosses knew someone was coming. It might have been us. It might have been thisâ€¦'third party' they alluded to. Whatever the case, I believe your bosses said something like this." He lifted a middle finger to illustrate his point. "I assume that's the universal translation for 'You're on your own' unless I misread that part of the message."

Salim was still confused, but the denial continued to kick in. "Liar! This is a fake!"

Kyle shook his head. "There's no fake here. Just pure, unfiltered communication." He put his hands together on the table and leaned forward. "Which reminds me of something. Tell me againâ€¦why didn't Dargus let you back inside the base when you asked him on Klensal?"

"Heâ€¦" Salim said thinking it over. "He wanted usâ€¦wanted us to keep watch."

"But you told him the cameras could keep track of that."

"Yeahâ€¦" Salim stopped as he saw Kyle lift an eyebrow. He then shook his head. "Noâ€¦no!" His lip quivered as he continued shaking his head. This was where the realization was kicking in.

So Kyle decided to hammer it further. "The truth? Dargus threw you guys out as a distraction. It gave him a chance to prepare everyone inside for a fight. You were just cannon fodder. Youâ€¦Hamaâ€¦those other guys." He brushed his hands. "Nothingâ€¦"

Salim slumped in his chair, processing what he just learned. "Noâ€¦no. Heâ€¦I'm the secondâ€¦was the second in command. The number two."

"A number two he locked outside when the wolves came sniffing around." Kyle could see Salim had nothing else to say yet, so he continued. "What if you knew? What if Dargus trusted his 'number two' enough to warn you we were coming? Maybe you still would have fought

and died, but maybe just maybe Hama would be sitting here next to you. As murderous as you think we are, we did keep you alive. And several people surrendered too."

"So why aren't you pestering them?" Salim mumbled.

"Because they don't know where Parker and 'Seva are. And they don't have a reason to get angry at them," Kyle said balling a fist for show. "But you do."

Salim exhaled deeply. He needed a bit more work.

"You and Dargus didn't get along very well, huh?" Kyle asked.

"He's a bastard..."

"Yes, they are." Kyle noticed Salim's confused reaction to his statement and realized what he said. "Y-yes, he was," he corrected himself.

"So you killed him?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Kyle held back a smile as he continued. "Your syndicate is still being run by bastards though; bastards who wrote off your entire base as expendable. Dargus knew this and let everyone die rather than find an alternate solution. If he, or you, had surrendered, maybe things wouldn't have turned out so badly." Salim clearly didn't buy it, but Kyle didn't expect him too.

He took the data pad back from Salim. "Because without Dargus or your bosses in our custody, most of their charges will be dropped on your ass and you don't have the support or representation to escape them. So as I see it, you have two options. Option one: you don't talk." He shrugged his shoulders. "Ok, that's your choice. We never find their base, they continue to hock their product and slavery expands throughout the local systems. You hold your honor and go to jail for a very long time."

He leaned back in his chair. "Then there's option two: you tell me where they are hiding right now. You tell us how many people are at the base, what their defenses are like and any other useful information. We'll go in, capture them and end this sorry mess. Sadly you'll still go to jail, but aside from any good feelings you'll feel for helping us, you may find that your sentence will be lighter than expected."

"Is that a bribe?" Salim said.

"Nope, it's the legal system. You sing like a canary, we'll argue your case and reduce your sentence. I'd say that's a fair deal for whatever it's worth."

Salim exhaled hard as he narrowed his stare. "All this time you spent talking, you could have beaten my ass for the information."

Kyle smirked. "I haven't ruled that out as an option," he said eyeing

every corner of the room for Salim to notice. "You see any cameras in here?"

That caught Salim off guard for a moment before Kyle continued. "It wouldn't be the first time and it wouldn't be the last. So I couldn't but I'm going to tell you why you'll talk instead; because you don't owe those jackasses anything. There won't be a funeral held in Hama's honor. There won't be a special place in their hearts because you refused to talk. All of that hard work and loyalty will be forgotten. And all you'll be able to think about when you sit in that jail cell is the sinking feeling that you're better than that. But hey, that's how businessmen like Parker and 'Seva work. And you and Hama both knew what you got yourselves into when you joined."

Salim was not happy at Kyle's attempt to use his own words against him. Probably because he knew Kyle was right!

"It's your choice though—and we've pussy footed for too long," Kyle said as he sat back up. "The ball's in your court."

Salim didn't not speak for a whole two minutes. Kyle couldn't tell if he was actually thinking it over or just wasting time. The man just stared down at his feet, with only shallow breaths and the hum of the lights filling the void.

After another minute of silence, Kyle stood up. "So be it," he muttered as he moved to the door.

Before he could open it though, he heard Salim mumble something. It was too faint to make out, but it stopped Kyle in his tracks.

He turned back to Salim. "What?" Salim didn't repeat himself. He walked back and leaned over to Salim with both hands on the table. "If you have something to say—say it."

Salim slowly lifted his head to face him. It looked like the man aged another two years with how sullen he looked, but he finally decided to open his mouth.

"Mavigon!"

Mavigon! That was a planet Kyle recognized.

"Are you sure?" He asked firmly.

"Western hemisphere...northern region...two auto-turrets guarding the main door...thirty-five men inside...yeah, I'm sure," Salim mumbled angrily.

They stared down each other for a short while as Kyle judged the validity of his confession. The man looked resentful, but it felt genuine.

"alright," Kyle said as he stood back up to leave. Before he did though, he offered one last thought to Salim. "You might have saved a lot of innocent people today."

"Go away!" Salim said as he sulked into his chair.

Kyle respected the man's wishes and left the room, with Ralston, Beckett and the other soldiers on guard waiting for his response. He let the door close behind him before speaking to Ralston. He already did enough to make Salim feel worthless, so it was best not to rub more salt into the wounds.

"Mavigon, in the northern region of the western hemisphere," Kyle said reiterating Salim's words.

Ralston put his hand to his comm. "Did you get that, Tu'uta?"

"Loud and clear, sir," Tangilanu said on the other line. "Searching for the nearest ship in the Han system now."

"Roger. Immediately relay connection to their commanding officer once they've been hailed. Ralston out." Ralston lowered his hand and nodded to Kyle. "Good work, lieutenant."

Before Kyle could reply, Ralston left the hall and went to the elevators. He could hear the Captain contact the bridge for immediate departure to the Gemini Sigma cluster.

Beckett watched Ralston as well before turning back to Kyle. "Think he told the truth?"

"We're going to find out one way or another," Kyle said as he motioned her to follow. "Let's hope for his sake he did..."

â€|

Resolme held his pistol in his hand as he sat in a solitary room he had found for himself. The Captain had notified everyone through the comm. system that they were heading for the Gemini Sigma cluster, yet he still didn't feel like returning to his post yet. All he could do right now was skulk and replay the events of Klensal in his mind. It was stupid, but he couldn't help it.

He felt guilty for causing this much of a delay. He hadn't intended to kill Dargus. He seriously meant it when he said it was supposed to be a disabling shot. It turns out his aim was not as good with trick shots like the lieutenant's was. The blood splatter from the headshot sprayed across his vision and he kept picturing the scene repeating in different angles like some kind of movie flashback.

There was more to his worry than just guilt for compromising the mission though. This was his first kill. It was hard to believe, but he had never made a proper kill up to this point. Most of his shots had been absorbed by kinetic barriers or just missed their mark altogether. It was one thing simulating a kill in training, but an actual killâ€|that was something he wasn't prepared for. As his hand continued to grip his pistol, he mentally felt Dargus' blood seeping through his glove down his wrist.

He leaned his head to his knees and slumped his hands next to his sides. The pistol slid from his fingers and he grit his teeth. He knew better than to feel this way. He was a trained ODS. They were conditioned for violence, shock and tragedy. He should be a better soldier. He should be as good as Noah wasâ€|.but he wasn't.

"Private?" A voice said from in front of him.

Resolme's head shot up to see Captain Ralston himself standing at the room's doorway. He hadn't even heard the Captain come in, but apparently his little hiding spot wasn't so hidden after all.

He knew he should get up and salute or apologize or return to his post or somethingâ€¦but he couldn't. The feeling wasn't registering in his body.

"Why aren't you at your post?" The Captain asked him sternly.

Resolme exhaled slowly. "I'mâ€¦I'm sorry. I justâ€¦I just needed to relax."

The Captain's eyes sized up Resolme as he continued to stand where he was. This confused Resolme a bit, but he kept his mouth shut.

"First time?" The Captain asked.

That didn't help Resolme's confusion.

"Is this your first time killing someone?" He clarified.

Resolme didn't know there was a look to someone who had made their first kill, but he guessed he must have had it. He nodded apologetically. "â€¦yeahâ€¦but I didn't-"

The Captain flicked his hand upwards to have Resolme stand up, which he did promptly. This was the part he expected where the Captain rebuked him for not being at his post for such a stupid reason. He took a breath and anticipated the verbal lumps.

"How long have you been on active duty, Private?"

This was the set-up. That, or an interview. To be fair, neither of them knew each other very well. Resolme tried to think of the right answer. "Umâ€¦a few monthsâ€¦yeah, a few months, sir."

Ralston nodded. "Your own choice?"

"â€¦yes, sir."

"Any family ties to the Alliance?"

That seemed particularly pointed to ask. "Umâ€¦two older brothers and an older sisterâ€¦sir."

"All active duty?"

Resolme hesitated. "Yesâ€¦um, m-my brother Tomasi and my sister Lavania are technicians on other ships. Noahâ€¦Noah was killed in action, sir."

"ODST?"

"Yes, sir."

"How recently?"

Resolme looked to the Captain, who held an interrogating glare as he waited for his answer. It was still hard thinking about it.

"â€|several months agoâ€|sir," He finally answered.

Ralston nodded, looked down to his feet with his hands on his hips and then looked back to Resolme. "I'm only saying this once," the Capatin started as Resolme braced himself. "That kill caused a hell of a lot of trouble. It made our search longer than needed and it may have caused damage we may never truly know. It was a brash action to makeâ€|"

He then paused and cleared his throat. "â€|but it was the right one and I'm grateful for it."

That wasn't what Resolme expected. "But Iâ€|"

"You saved Beckett's life," Ralston interrupted. "She owes you for that."

If this was some way for the Captain to confuse him, then it was working splendidly. "Butâ€|but, I didn't meanâ€|Iâ€|I just tried to disableâ€|"

"Stop," Ralston said firmly. Resolme's mouth closed shut as the Captain pointed to him. "No excusesâ€|ever. The lives of my men and women are worth ten of that feckless Turian jackass' hide. When he tries killing my soldiers, I don't care if he knows the location to the fountain of youth or the greatest super weapon the galaxy has ever seen. He's going down with a bullet in his eyeâ€|just like you gave him."

Resolme continued to force his mouth shut to prevent any interruptions.

Ralston lowered his pointed hand to his side. "Now you learn this immediately. Killing is going to sting, no matter if it's your first or your seventieth. You think the pain will go away over timeâ€|but it won't."

Resolme's legs shook from stress as the Captain crossed his arms. "Let it sting. Let it fuel your desire for justice. Remember that when you are working for the ODS, the Alliance or any other branch, every kill you make is saving a life. You know it, your brother knew it and every soldier under my command knows it. We take the lethal wounds. We commit the unpleasant acts. We swing death's scythe so billions of people never have to. And at the end of the day, maybe the sting of murder will be supplanted by the overwhelming pride in knowing that you made a difference."

Every word the Captain spoke was hypnotizing in a way Resolme had never heard before. This must be that soldier side he had long since retired to become a leader.

"Don't become the others," Ralston said glancing out the door. "I've seen what happens when the body count rises. When you leave this door and get back to work, don't give in to cynicism. We ARE heroes and we ARE protecting the galaxy one planet at a time. No kill is too big or too small if it brings peace. Keep that in mind and you will never

regret the sting again."

The Captain softened his features following that remark, allowing Resolme a chance to finally breathe. "Do you understand?" He asked.

After a couple moments to process his words, Resolme nodded.

"Good, because we're not having this conversation again."

The Captain turned to leave, but Resolme had one last question to ask.

"Sir?"

The Captain stopped without turning back as he listened.

"If it's not too much to ask, what, um, who was your first?"

The Captain just stood there, barely moving a muscle. Then he replied.

"A young girl," he said. "Couldn't have been older than sixteen. With the wounds she had, it was the right thing to do." He turned his head slightly to look Resolme in the eyes, showing only the slightest hint of regret at the memory. "Every kill we make brings peace, one way or another."

With that, he exited the room and left Resolme by himself again.

This had been a lot for Resolme to process. Maybe Ralston was right. Maybe killing Dargus was necessary. Still, he'd have to think about that whole 'killing to bring peace' thing. It was the reason he joined, but this was the first time it had ever been tested. Everything should be easy to comprehend. The lieutenant and the others made it look so easy. Maybe that was the point though: to make it 'look' easy.

Taking another moment to collect his nerves, he walked out of the room and went to return to his post. It would be a couple minutes to get back.

So he decided to his omni-tool and playback the conversation he just had just recorded. Unbeknownst to the Captain, Resolme had pressed record on his mini-camera the moment he stood up. He wouldn't have any video to work off of, but he could at least hear the Captain's words again. Ever since the Forward Unto Dawn, he wasn't going to miss out on anything that would be important for learning or posterity. Noah had always told him to pay attention and he was going to take that advice any way he could.

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**Codex Entry (Alliance): **__Artificial Intelligence - History_

The development of artificial intelligence in human culture can be traced back to the 21__st__ century, though archaeological discoveries have shown races as old as the Forerunners also using

such constructs. Originally created to assist in computations outside of human limitations, the nature and purpose of A.I.'s expanded over many centuries to become integral parts of human society from wide scale expansion to infrastructure maintenance._

Human A.I. models were broken into two categories: "Dumb" A.I.'s with limited performance functions and "Smart" A.I.'s capable of simulating active human intelligence. Smart A.I.'s in particular proved valuable in humanity's colonization past the Forerunner Cluster, aiding in settlement maintenance and coordinating necessary communication between worlds. They also proved to be the backbone of Humanity's campaign against the Covenant forces, assisting both intergalactic and ground warfare strategy and cyber warfare tactics. The heroic efforts of A.I.'s like the Spirit of Fire's Selina, the Harvest A.I. Sif, the Halsey A.I. Cortana and many others have helped save countless human lives.

A.I. development went through drastic changes, however, once contact with the Council races was made. Already wary of sentient intelligence from the Geth rebellion, the Council feared that prolific use of Smart A.I.'s within the Forerunner Cluster races could prove catastrophic should a glitch or error arise. Tensions only worsened when the incidents concerning rampancy, irrational and dangerous behavior caused near the end of an A.I.'s seven-year lifespan, came into discussion. The Council issued a preemptive warning to Alliance, the Sangheili Empire and the other Forerunner Cluster races that should they desire further discourse with the galactic community, drastic reduction of Smart A.I. use was required.

After many long negotiations, acceptable terms were finally agreed upon. All Smart A.I.'s in Alliance space were offered a 'retirement' either on Reach's mega server or Alliance sponsored hubs to live out their remaining lifespan in peace. Despite several rebellious Smart A.I.'s fleeing Alliance jurisdiction to the Attican Traverse, the remaining were cooperative and supportive to the terms. Mini-memorials have been placed at these hubs to commemorate the work these constructs provided.

_In exchange for such drastic actions, plans were set in motion to construct Human and Sangheili government embassies on the Citadel. Additionally, efforts have been made by the Council to ensure cooperative operations as Citadel V.I.'s and Alliance Dumb A.I.'s continue to develop alongside each other.
>

By 2683, A.I. production for all races had been narrowed down to four major cross-species corporations, including Synthetic Insights, Ltd.. Illegal Smart A.I.'s continue to arise within the Attican Traverse and Terminus Systems, though their numbers are relatively small and are untied to any Council race governments.

For further history on Human A.I. history and development, consult your local extranet server. Non ONI-classified A.I. details are also available on Alliance databases.

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**And there is our chapter for now. Tune in soon for the next chapter also currently in the works. For those who know how this mission

works, you can expect a greater deal of action and gun play to come.
**

**However, there will be a cameo from TLS to look forward to as well. Who could it be? Well, you'll have to find out next chapter!

>

In the meantime, feel free to check the plugs above and leave your thoughts on this chapter through a review, PM or a post on my Tumblr account. Hope everyone is doing well this year!

**And because it still depresses the heck out of me, R.I.P. Phillip Seymour Hoffman.
>

10. Another Incredibly Hostile Takeover

Hey everyone! Today's my birthday! Instead of having you give me gifts and remind me that twenty-four actually that old though, Im giving you all a gift instead. That's right, it's time for more Last of an Ancient Breed!

(Though I would love for someone to add tropes onto my section of the TLS TV Tropes page if anyone would be so kind...)

When we last left the squad, they were making their way to Mavigon to finally shut down the syndicate. Little do they know what kind of ally is waiting to lend a hand. A very pronounced TLS cameo is about to come into play, so enjoy!

...

1120 Hours, February 28th, 2683

SSV Tokyo approaching Mavigon

Han System, Gemini Sigma

...

Kyle watched through the bridge's windows as the _SSV Tokyo_ entered a mass relay field and was shot through a flurry of blue and green. Though nothing should surprise him by now, mass relays were still a strange concept. A system of giant tuning forks with an infinite element zero output that could make thousand light year jumps happen in a matter of seconds? And doing so without inflicting any particle distortion or damage? It was too good to be true. Even Slipspace wasn't as instantaneous.

Not to say he didn't prefer Slipspace as an alternative. While tearing a hole in reality wasn't scientifically sound, it was a much more precise method of travel. A working Fujikawa drive could open a portal almost exactly where you wanted it to be. Relay jumps only took you to that system's connecting relay, adding additional travel time depending on how far you had to go to your destination. It seemed like comparing both methods evened out the pros and cons.

Then again, Kyle was a soldier. He was lucky to barely pass high school science, so who was he to offer constructive insights on space travel?

As he finished that thought, the color outside evaporated and normal space filled the view as they exited the Han System relay.

"And that's another successful jump," Chief Helmsman Benjamin Young spoke into his personal flight console. Kyle was a short distance behind the three helmsmen piloting the ship as Young opened up some holo charts. "Thrusters are at optimal capacity and heat emissions are stable."

"Drift levels at 1600K and normalizing. Hull integrity at one hundred percent" helmsman Mack Quinn added.

"Navigation systems are recalibrated. ETA to rendezvous coordinatesâ€¦five minutes," helmsman Jackie Paulsen also added.

"Good work," Ralston's voice sounded from Young's console. "Patch me through once we're close. We don't want to keep our guests waiting."

"Aye aye, sir," Young said as the channel closed and he turned to Kyle. "Guess you decided to stick around?"

"Might as well," Kyle said leaning on a nearby wall and examining his armor. "I'm all dressed up with no place to go."

"Well at least you're going somewhere. We have to sit here like good little boys and girls while you get to take down the big bad drug dealers."

"A pilot's life is a lonely one. All work and no action," Paulsen joked looking to Kyle. "Bet you're eager to kick some ass though."

"I'm not sure 'eager' is the right word, but sure," Kyle replied.

"Ah come on. The way you mopped the floor with those Klensal guys? That's some Spartan level of awesome shit."

"Tell that to McCullen and Jackson down at medbay," Quinn interjected.

"I didn't say it was 'smooth as shit,' but it was awesome shit," Paulsen defended.

Kyle changed the conversation as he looked over Young's shoulder. "So how come Ralston's making you report the post-jump statistics?"

"Just formalities," Young said. "Anderson never liked doing the mandatory 'maintenance checks' after a relay jump, but Ralston's a true old timer. If the handbook says to do it, he'll do it."

"Except for the part about 'need to know basis' with the crew," Quinn added. "He's more than happy to blab about something if he feels it's

important."

"He likes being honest with those who should know," Kyle said as he recalled the chat prior to finding the Forward Unto Dawn. "Keep everyone prepared who should be prepared."

"Apparently," Young remarked. "Anyway, it's protocol to report to the commanding officer after a successful jump. The last thing we need is all of that energy tampering with our systems."

As Young continued discussing technical details, Kyle noticed a vid streaming footage from the Alliance News Network on the bottom of the helmsman's console. Though the audio was being channeled into Young's earpiece, he could see a reporter analyzing footage from the Geth attack on Eden Prime. Ever since that broadcast, everyone's been on their toes.

Young sensed him eyeing the vid, and quickly minimized the vid. "Sorry, sir," he apologized. "I promise I'm paying attention."

"I'm not the Captain," Kyle reassured. "I won't tell."

"Thanks. I've already seen that broadcast, butâ€¦you know. On top of everything else on the Alliance's to-do list, now there's human hating robots on our doorstep."

"The way Young's been watching that vid, you'd think the Geth were invading Earth," Paulsen said. "It's not like we have a super powerful defense system and thousands of ships protecting our planet."

"Well we don't know that much about them so we can't be too safe," Young replied looking to Kyle. "You heard much, sir?"

"My textbooks were written in the Stone Age," Kyle joked. "So not really."

"There's not much to know," Quinn replied. "They're a bunch of rogue AI's that rebelled against the Quarians three hundred years ago and have pretty much been unseen since."

"They're almost solely the reason the Council banned Smart AI's," Paulsen added.

"Yeah, but ever since then they've just stewed behind the Perseus Veil. What's their excuse for attacking Eden Prime now."

"Lack of resources? Boredom? A religious call to arms demanding the extinction of mankind? You know, the usual reasons for planetary invasion."

"Now you're sounding like Jeff."

Paulsen rolled her eyes. "Yeah. How nice to be compared to that lucky bastard."

Who?" Kyle asked unfamiliar with the name's significance.

"Jeff Moreau," Young clarified. "We all went to flight school together. He's piloting the Normandy for the Chief."

That caught Kyle's attention. "Is he now?"

"Yup. Nearly got himself killed and/or kicked out of the Navy to do so, but yup."

"How so?"

"Well this is just what Captain Anderson told me, so take it with a grain of salt. A few months ago, the Captain was with some Alliance and Council big wigs to oversee the ship's test run. Unbeknownst to them, Jeff snuck onto the ship, locked out the originally assigned pilot and hijacked it. They thought he was a pirate or saboteur at first, so they sent a bunch of fighters to shoot him down. Not only did he fly circles around them, but he also completed the entire course before bringing it back without a scratch. He would have been court marshaled on the spot if some Turian general hadn't intervened."

"Why would a Turian care about what happened to a human pilot?"

"Because they helped fund the Normandy's construction, so they have a say over who gets the job. And apparently the general got a hard-on after seeing Jeff in action. That's quoted from the official report, by the way."

"I'm sure it was," Kyle said as he blocked out the mental image. He looked out the window to see how the journey was going. There appeared to be a ship out in the distance, but it was too far to make out completely. He then tuned back to Young's story.

"So the lesson here is that if you break the rules and put lives in danger, you'll get to pilot the Alliance's most advanced cruiser alongside a resurrected war hero."

"Which is why we should plan something when they build a second Normandy," Paulsen said to the other helmsmen. "If a cripple like Jeff can overpower a pilot, we could take on a whole crew between the three of us."

"Yeah. We might even share the same prison cell afterwards," Quinn rebutted. "Provided we can even pilot the ship like he did."

"You don't seriously buy the 'best pilot in the Alliance' bit, do you?"

"He was top of our class by a wide margin. Just saying."

Kyle figured he should change the subject, mostly because all of this inside stuff was going over his head. He eyed the minimized Alliance News Network vid on Young's computer again. "So how many Geth did the Chief take out before they retreated?"

"Enough," Young replied. "I don't know about you, but watching that guy in action is something else. Doubt anyone could stand up to him in a fight." He turned back to Kyle. "No offense."

Kyle shrugged, not saying he was offended but not wanting to ask much else about the Chief. He had satiated his curiosity for the time

being.

"What was that stuff about the 'zombies' the Chief fought?" Quinn asked. "That sounded crazy."

"Zombies?" Kyle asked curiously.

"It's something they broadcasted the other day," Young replied as he maximized the vid and fast-forwarded to a section Kyle hadn't seen yet. The reporter was analyzing the aftermath of the attack as the camera panned across a pile of bodies in a building.

They definitely weren't human or Geth bodies though! Kyle noticed the blue and grey skin discoloration as metal circuitry spread across their limbs. Small emissions of blue light were seen in their dead eyes and gaping mouths. Their frames had been emaciated too, resembling skeletons more than actual zombies. It was a creepy sight even for him.

"Shitâ€¦" Kyle muttered.

"I know right," Young replied. "No one's seen anything like it, not even the Quarrians. It's a new weapon the Geth developed that impales bodies and turns them intoâ€¦| 'husks' or something."

"Whoever leaked that footage should consider themselves lucky," Quinn added. "ONI would've classified that faster than a relay jump if they had their way."

"Has the Council offered help to keep the Geth at bay?" Kyle asked.

"Nope," Paulsen replied. "The Alliance sent support fleets to protect the nearby colonies, but the Council are labeling this a 'strictly human affair.' Something about 'not taking responsibility for our lack of security.'"

"Sounds like the Council to me."

"Yep. Just a bunch of assholes." As Paulsen said that, she checked outside the window. "Speaking of assholesâ€¦|"

Kyle also looked out to see the distant ship now fully in view. It was pretty big, at least twice the _Tokyo's_ size. The colors and insignias on the ship's side explained why though. It wouldn't be like ONI to not have the biggest guns out in space.

"Channel's open, sir," Quinn said to Young.

"Alright, time for first contact," Young said tapping on his console and clearing his throat. "_SSV Tokyo _to _Mare Erythraeum_. _Mare Erythraeum_, do you copy?"

After a second of static, a woman's voice sounded through the speakers. "This is the _Mare Erythraeum_. We read you loud and clear, _Tokyo_. Our commanding officer is requesting audience with your Captain."

"Granted," Captain Ralston's voice replied through the console. "The airlock is prepped for your arrival."

"Roger that," the woman said. "ETA in two minutes. Over and out."

The woman's feed cut off as Ralston continued. "Young, is Nolan with you?"

"Right behind me, sir."

"Good. I'll be there in a moment," Ralston said as his channel closed.

Young turned to Nolan. "Hope we didn't bore you for too long," he teased.

"Eh," Kyle shrugged. "I just distracted you guys for a few minutes. I'll come back when I need another history lesson."

"Sounds good," Young chuckled in reply. "Have fun storming the castle."

The other helmsmen mutter farewells as Kyle walked to the airlock. So of all the ships patrolling Alliance space, the one available in the Han System was an ONI cruiser. He hadn't had much experience with ONI, but he was roughly familiar with their secretive nature. They were the hands that kept humanity and the Alliance in line, whether you wanted them to or not. Even with the occasional slip-up here and there, they weren't a force to be taken lightly.

Hopefully that meant they had some good firepower on their ship.

As Kyle reached the airlock, Ralston entered from the other side of the hallway. Without much of a greeting, they met by the doorway and waited for their guests.

"Ever met a 'Spook' before?" Ralston said using the old nickname for ONI officers.

"Not on an individual basis," Kyle admitted. "Is their bite as bad as their bark?"

"We're about to find out," Ralston said as the airlock's control pad flashed red. The ONI shuttle was docked and going through decontamination. Kyle felt anxious. ONI people were just people, he reminded himself. It was probably just some old guy like Ralston who happened to have higher clearance. He stood there patiently as the control pad flashed green.

"DECONTAMINATION COMPLETE," Harmony's voice chimed from the control pad as the doors hissed open.

The people waiting inside the airlock were not who Kyle expected them to be. On the right side was a slender African woman in ONI marine combat armor holding her helmet under her right arm. She couldn't be any more than twenty-eight or nine from her looks, though she had the rough complexion of an experienced soldier.

On the left side was a Caucasian woman with her long blonde hair in a bun under her officer's hat. She was a small woman, but she had the muscles and physique of a champion gymnast. She was also wearing a

customized version of Alliance blues, with a solid black color blended with ONI symbols and her Major officer bar. She seemed young to be in her position of power, but it wasn't Kyle's place to question that. He did have to question that cold, emotionless look on her face though. It was the right level of menacing and not menacing where it became unnerving!

The airlock closed behind the women as Kyle and Ralston saluted the Major.

"At ease," the major said flatly as they lowered their hands.
"Dominic Ralston?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ralston replied.

"Major Danielle Ackerson," she introduced herself before pointing to the other soldier. "This is Captain Kya Falana. She'll be overseeing the assault." She then looked over to Kyle. "Who's this?"

Kyle was a little perturbed by the tone of her question, and the assertion that this new person was taking charge, but Ralston answered for him. "This is 2nd Lieutenant Kyle Nolan. He led the Klensal assault and found the base here."

"Good," Ackerson said with no change in tone as she and Falana walked out into the hallway. Ralston and Kyle turned to each other confused before following her.

As they entered the Galaxy Map room, some of the soldiers saluted Ackerson.

"At ease to everyone," she said saluting them back while stopping anyone else from doing the same.

There was something about Ackerson that Kyle hadn't seen in other officers. Most of them were seasoned veterans like him and Ralston, having the authority of a leader but the understanding of a soldier. Ackerson's demeanor was something much more professional, given by force of personality than actual combat experience. Not to doubt her combat skills, but it was much more bureaucratic in comparison.

Captain Falana turned to Ralston as Ackerson inspected the Galaxy Map controls and ordered the engineers around. "How's your current fighting force?" She asked.

"We're short two marines and an ODST, but otherwise all hands are prepped for combat," Ralston replied. "We've also fueled two Makos, our Orbital Drop Assault Vehicle and a Mantis for the assault."

"Keep the ODAV running, but we'll let you know if additional vehicles will be needed."

"Shouldn't we have all our armor on the ground?" Ralston asked concerned.

"That would be unnecessary. From the Intel you provided, we can overpower the occupants with minimal armor use."

"We're not waging a full scale war," Ackerson chimed in looking over Galaxy Map railing. "The quieter we wipe them out, the better."

"Yes, ma'am," Ralston said. Kyle hadn't seen Ralston be this submissive before, but then again Ackerson and Falana weren't your average superior officers.

"Have your lieutenant escort Captain Falana to the rest of your men," Ackerson said as she walked back to the group. "Falana, give an account of all available weapons, armor and manpower on the ship. I want everything in place before the syndicate is aware of our presence," She turned back to Ralston. "Have one of your technicians send any vid footage from the Klensal raid for additional planning. I want a hands-on view of the Storm's combat patterns so we can get the upper hand."

She then turned to Kyle. "And have your squad bring the Klensal prisoners to my shuttle for additional questioning."

Kyle raised an eyebrow at the request. "I'm not sure there's much-"

"I said do it," Ackerson interrupted.

He hesitated for a split second. Those eyes could cut diamonds right now. He eventually nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Get to it."

Kyle quickly led Falana out of the room as Ackerson continued to talk battle plans with Ralston. So that's why she was in charge. She already had the hard-nosed, thick-skinned persona of someone twice her age. He hadn't found it charming yet.

"She's like that sometimes," Falana said as they walked into the elevator. "Don't take it personally. "Is your squad geared up?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said as he pressed the button to descend.

"Good. We're going in firstâ€¦"

â€¦

The ODAV shook and rumbled as Kyle braced himself in the passenger seat. It had been a while since they did a proper combat drop and even longer since they did a vehicle drop. The heat shields outside glowed a bright red as they broke through the atmosphere and prepared for the next drop phase. He glanced down the side window and scouted the terrain. It was an ugly little planet with a frozen surface that looked more like rock than actual water. A large snowstorm brewed over the drop site, prompting him to switch the thermal vision on.

He took a moment to admire the vehicle they were riding in. If this were any other mission or they were regular Alliance soldiers, they would be crammed into a tiny Mako. This thing, however, was an ODST customized Mako and a beautiful one at that. It had a double-barreled cannon mounted on the top with independent and linked fire, a front

antipersonnel machine gun, two independently controlled machine guns on the sides and durable armor plating that could take a fair share of damage. All of that was on top of the six-person seating that was compact but with decent space.

Goes to show that when you drive a Broadfin, you really have it all!

The downside? Sharing it with Captain 'Taking charge of your operation.' He glanced over to Falana in the driver seat as she guided the vehicle through the drop phases. It should be him there, but the Major made her orders clear.

The operation seemed easy on paper. The _Mare Erythraeum's _scans revealed that the Mavigon base had two primary entrances. The main one was a building located on top of a mountain, guarded with auto-turrets like Dalamar had told them. The other, however, was a covert entrance at the mountain's base used for vehicles. It was also guarded by auto-turrets, but not nearly as fortified. These guys were sitting upon a nice little throne and the snowstorms surrounding the mountain only made it more ominous.

So what better way for them to crash the party than knocking on both doors? His squad was being dropped in first to clear the area for Kodiak landings by taking out the turrets guarding both entrances. They'd surely run into some vehicular opposition too, but their bad boy vehicle could handle itâ€|hopefully. Once that was done, they would cram soldiers into both entrances and force the mercs into submission. It would be fruitless for them to fight back when they had no means to escape.

Kyle glanced back to the rest of his squad. Beckett and Resolme manned the side machine guns, with Resolme's trigger finger noticeably itching for some combat. That left La Rosa and Tangilanu to sit in the rear passenger seats and enjoy the ride while Kyle and Falana used the main guns.

Kyle could see in La Rosa's body language that something else was on his mind though.

"Credit for your thoughts?" Kyle said discreetly opening a private chat with him.

"Huh," La Rosa said snapping out of his thoughts. "Sorryâ€|I justâ€|I swear I've seen her before."

"The Captain?"

"No, Beckett," La Rosa scoffed. "Yes the Captain! I don't know why, but I can't shake the feeling we met somewhere."

"Any idea where?"

"If I knew, I would have told you," La Rosa said shrugging his shoulders. "Whateverâ€|"

Another huge rumble shook the Broadfin as the squad braced itself.

"LZ's coming up fast," Falana said over TEAMCOM. "Get those guns

ready."

Beckett and Resolme pulled up their targeting displays while Kyle grabbed the cannon controls. The Broadfin was big enough that it took more than one person to drive and shoot, so no multitasking was required like on a Mako or Hammerhead.

"Left gun is good," Resolme checked back with Falana.

"Right gun too," Beckett added.

Falana turned to Kyle as he adjusted his settings.

"Main guns armed and ready," he said.

From the corner of his eye, he spotted mass effect rounds outside zipping past snowflakes. Pings ricocheted off the bottom of the vehicle too.

"They're ready too," Tangilanu deadpanned.

"Alright, we're coming in hot," Falana barked. "We are authorized to engage all hostiles."

Kyle took a breath as he waited for that final landing. They had been doing so many 'by the book' stealth and take down missions that it was about time they did an old fashioned combat drop. No better way to get a job done than hitting these bitches hard and fast.

"Brace for impact," Falana said.

The Broadfin landed with a muffled but violent thud into a large patch of snow, sending a cloud of white, watery flakes pluming around them. Without missing a beat, Falana put her foot to the pedal and drove through the cloud. Kyle immediately readjusted the thermal vision to give further visibility through the snowstorm, revealing their targets dead ahead.

Two auto-turrets guarding the entrance fired at the Broadfin as Falana did her best to strafe them. Kyle aimed his cannons to retaliateâ€¦|

Just then, a group of vehicles zipped out from the entrance and bee-lined directly towards them.

"Five Ghosts and two Warthogs on our right," he said immediately ID'ing them.

He knew this wouldn't be a cake walk. The last base was too underpowered for them not to have some good armor here.

"Focus on the turrets," Falana said moving her fingers to the forward machine gun trigger. "We'll deal with them."

"Roger that, ma'am," Beckett said as she aimed and opened fire on the column of vehicles. The vehicles scattered, returning fire with plasma and mass effect rounds. Falana turned sharply left to avoid their fire, throwing off Kyle's aim on the turrets.

"Shit!" He cursed as he readjusted. Weapon fire erupted from Falana

and Resolme's position as the enemy vehicles attempted to strafe and surround them. The Ghosts had a movement advantage over the Warthogs with their hover mobility, but the Warthogs had the excess firepower to make it up through their turrets and passenger cover fire.

The Broadfin's shields shimmered as it absorbed enemy fire. After a few more seconds, Kyle found the turrets in his crosshairs again. He locked onto the left turret and fired both barrels one at a time. The turret's shields absorbed the first shot, but the second struck its base and blew out a chunk of metal. A good hit, but it was still in the fight and fired a rocket at their vehicle.

"Rocket on our left!" He shouted to Falana as she turned sharply right, dodging the rocket easily.

"Got him!" Beckett called out as Kyle spotted a Ghost's Unggoy driver being struck in the head. The little alien slumped off the vehicle as it's engine switched off and it plowed into a pile of snow.

"Ah!" Resolme shouted as a Warthogs fired at his position. The shields broke from the fire and mass effect rounds pounded his side of the vehicle.

"Aim for the tires!" La Rosa called from the back.

"I am!" Resolme said looking over to Kyle. "Need a hand here!"

"Negative!" Falana answered for Kyle. "Keep on those turrets."

Kyle wasn't happy having Falana bossing his squad, but there was no time to complain. He had to follow his superior's orders for now.

"Hold on, I'm coming up," Tangilanu said squeezing between the two machine gunners and looking over Resolme's shoulder.

Kyle couldn't turn back to see how they were doing as the turrets continued firing rockets at them. Falana was trying to get distance between them to let the shields recharge, but the other vehicles weren't helping. At least Beckett was holding things up on her side.

Kyle locked his crosshairs directly onto the left turret's nozzle. This ought to take the sucker out! He fired both cannons at the same time, hitting his target right on the mark. Whatever rocket round the turret had in its chamber combined with his shots and blew a hole out the back of its top. It slumped forward as its lights went dim.

"One down!" He shouted.

"Good. Get the other one," Falana said turning the Broadfin again.

However, it was right then that Kyle saw a Ghost boosting right into the path of the vehicle. Beckett's rounds weren't catching up to it fast enough. They were going to collide!

"Watch out!"

His warning was too late as the Ghost went right under the Broadfin's mammoth tires. It exploded in a blue plasma flame, shaking the Broadfin and knocking its shields cold. To make things worse, the cannon's targeting screen went static.

"Shit shit shit!" He said trying to fix his monitor. He turned to Tangilanu behind him. "Targeting system's dead!"

"Hold on!" Tangilanu said as he squeezed up to the front and checked the screen. "Gimme a sec."

"We don't have a sec," Kyle barked back as plasma scorched the vehicle's sides.

"That Warthog's killing us," Beckett said firing at a nearby Ghost.

"Told you!" Resolme shouted back also firing at his targets.

"It's coming around behind us," Beckett said.

"Fix that goddamn thing!" Falana told Tangilanu.

"I'm trying! I'm trying!" He said quickly using his omni-tool to reconfigure the monitor.

Just then, the air sucked out from inside the vehicle as Kyle turned to see La Rosa lower the back ramp slightly.

"What the hell are you doing?" Falana shouted angrily.

La Rosa ignored her as he unfolded his sniper rifle and took aim at the Warthog now tailing behind them, not even flinching as turret rounds ricochet around him. He fired right over the vehicle's windshield and struck the driver in the head. The merc in the passenger seat tried taking control of the wheel, but the driver's foot was pressed too firmly onto the pedal to slow down. La Rosa fired a second shot and popped the front left tire. The Wartgog swerved and rolled on its side across the snow, crushing the gunner and passenger under it.

La Rosa raised the ramp back up and turned back to the impressed squad.

"You're welcome," he said as he sat back down with his rifle still unfolded.

Just then, the targeting monitor's screen returned to normal.

"Hot damn!" Tangilanu exclaimed.

"Kill those assholes," Falana said to Kyle.

Kyle grabbed the controls and fired at the remaining turret's nozzle like last time. The impact cracked the shields and scorched the turret, but it was still standing.

"Negative impact," he said to Falana. "Think you can get us clos-

The thought was interrupted as the Broadfin went over a small hill. It landed after a short weightless fall, violently shaking from the impact. Kyle braced himself by holding onto his seat.

"Damn it!" La Rosa said as he also let go of his seat. "Watch where you're driving!"

"I don't exactly have a road to follow, thank you!" Falana shot back at him. "Feel free to jump out and fight them yourself, Hawkeye!"

A blue plasma flame erupted to their left as chunks of a Ghost flew past the windshield.

"Got him!" Resolme shouted excited as he looked back to Tangilanu. "I got him!"

"Don't look at me!" Tangilanu said pointing back out. "Keep shooting!"

"Right. Sorry," Resolme replied turning back to the controls.

Kyle turned back to Falana. "Get us closer. I need a clear shot."

"Alright," Falana said as she turned and moved back to the entrance. The auto-turret shot mass effect rounds at the Broadfin as it primed another rocket.

"It's got us locked," Falana said.

"I got it," Kyle reassured her as he locked his target. The sucker was in full view now!

He fired the cannons at the turret. A gratifying flame erupted as it's main cannon sheared off the top and plopped onto the ground with a thud.

"Both targets down!" He said excitedly.

An explosion erupted to his left.

"Second Warthog down!" Beckett said.

The final two Ghosts broke ranks and made for the trail leading up the mountainâ€|

â€|or they would have if Kyle hadn't intervened. He nailed the first one with a single shot, engulfing the driver and sending the wreckage rolling. The second shot hit the other Ghost's engine, stopping it dead in the middle of the snow field. The driver abandoned it and desperately tried running to the base. A quick burst from Falana's machine gun ended that.

"I was saving him just for you," Kyle said to her.

She ignored him and opened a TEAMCOM channel back to the _Mare Erythraeum. _"The back entrance is clear," she said as she made her way to the trail.

"Good work, Falana," Ackerson's voice said through the channel. "Make

sure all anti-air threats are dealt with."

"Roger that. We'll notify when-"

"Plasma sphere!" Tangilanu shouted pointing out the windshield.

Through the swirling snowy winds, a large blue plasma ball plummeted from the sky directly towards them.

"Crap!" Falana said turning the vehicle sharply, narrowly missing the plasma as it hit the ground next to them, sending dirt and melted snow flying around it.

"What was that?" Ackerson asked.

"Wraiths," Falana answered. "We got heavy resistance waiting up top."

"Copy that. Take out anti-air opposition and we'll send support."

"Double copy," Falana said as they drove up the trail. At the halfway point, she stopped and turned to the squad. "Alright, we're going to encounter heavy armor up top. The shields will be up to full strength soon, but they won't do much good if we have multiple Wraiths pounding our asses." She pointed to Resolme. "Let's get Tangilanu on the turret for this one."

"Fineâ€|" Resolme said masking disappointment as he shifted out of his seat to the back with La Rosa.

"You did good, kid," Tangilanu said taking Resolme's spot and getting familiarized with the controls.

She turned to Kyle. "Nolan, I want you to focus on any anti-air Wraiths first and foremost. Once they're gone, the Major's forces can begin their assault."

"Ok," Kyle replied back, still not enjoying her taking control of his operation.

"Once we're clear, I want Resolme, La Rosa and Tangilanu on the ground immediately to get the door open. Nolan and Beckett will stick behind with me to check for stragglers. Any questions?"

No one replied.

"Good. Let's go."

She slammed the pedal to the metal and the Broadfin rushed up the trail. The winds were picking up, making the heat vision struggle to get a clear focus outside.

"Got to hand it to her," Beckett said in a private channel to Kyle. "If anything, she knows how to lead an assault."

"Yeah yeahâ€|" Kyle muttered under his breath.

"Well, we just have to finish the mission and then we're back in

charge."

Before he could say anything back, a rocket exploded up ahead. To Kyle's right, two turrets mounted on top of the base entrance fired more rockets at them. He didn't need to look hard for the Wraiths, as he saw another plasma sphere launch from a hill nearby.

"Second hill to the right," he said to Falana. "I'm on it."

Then a flurry of plasma fire struck the shields on their left side.

"Anti-air Wraith to the left," Tangilanu said firing at it.

Kyle swiveled the cannons towards the Covenant Storm colored Wraith as its machine gunner continued firing at them. Falana fired at the turrets while Beckett took on the other Wraith. Falana continually dodging incoming fire wasn't helping Kyle's aim though.

"Shoot at it, Nolan!" Falana shouted.

"I'm on it!" He shouted back firing blindly towards the Wraith. One shot hit the shields while the other missed completely, sending a cloud of snow blowing towards the merc manning the Wraith's machine guns. Damn!

"Incoming!" Beckett said as a plasma sphere exploded directly on her side. She shielded her visor with her arm as the gun sparks erupted from the gun before it went out completely. "Right gun is down!"

"Shit!" La Rosa said as he looked out the window.

Kyle had to act fast. The continuous fire and scorching was wearing down the Broadfin's outer layer. They wouldn't be able to take much more of this.

"Turret down!" Falana said. Her continued attack on the left turret had whittled its shields enough where she could blast burning mass effect rounds into its base, shutting it down completely. "Get that Wraith, Nolan!"

Kyle took a breath to calm his nerves and aimed for the Wraith. That first shot had weakened its shield, but it would take more than one front shot to stop that thing. He had to be more precise.

"Have the right side facing the Wraith," Kyle told Falana. "Tangilanu can focus on the other turret better."

"Alright," Falana said as she quickly turned the vehicle around. Tangilanu fired at the remaining turret as Kyle shot at the Wraith. Its shields broke and the machine gunner was caught in the ensuing blast, slumping over dead onto his controls.

"Machine guns are down," Kyle said to Falana.

"It's trying to run," she said as the Wraith's thrusters activated.

Not on Kyle's watch!

"I got it!" He said as the Broadfin avoided another plasma sphere. This was actually working to his benefit, as the anti-air Wraith's turning left part of its back exposed. He had to hit it just right. This might be his only chance at nailing it.

"Do it!" Falana shouted again.

He took the shot, firing both cannons at once. The Wraith exploded in giant blue plasma flame, sending metal and the drivers' corpses flying onto the ground.

"Scratch one Wraith," he said excited.

"Major, all anti-air threats are neutralized," Falana spoke into the TEAMCOM.

"Copy that. Sending support now," Ackerson replied.

Kyle quickly turned the cannons towards the remaining turret and fired the freshly reloaded shots. The turret's top half completely exploded upon impact.

"Hey! I had that!" Tangilanu mock complained.

"Snooze you lose," Kyle replied.

Just then, another plasma sphere landed next to them. The Broadfin shook and alarms blared as Kyle checked the vehicle's status. The right side had a burning hole that seeped to the inner layer. The thermal vision died upon impact as well.

"Hull strength is giving fast!" Tangilanu said as the squad looked out into the storm.

The remaining Wraith cut through the snowy winds and head right for the squad. A flurry of plasma fire shot from the machine gun and struck the front of the vehicle, scorching around the windshield and intensifying the warning alarms. On the top of the Wraith, Kyle could see another plasma sphere prepping to fire.

"We can't take much more of this!" Beckett called out.

"Shoot that bastard, Nolan," Falana told him.

"That won't be necessary, folks," a new voice said over the TEAMCOM.

Before they could identify the voice, a barrage of missiles slam into the back of the Wraith and blew it apart. Through the wreckage's smoke, Kyle saw two ONI Broadsword fighters pass over the Broadfin and fly back up into the atmosphere.

"Tango down," the voice said. "You're all good, Captain."

"Thanks, Longley," Falana replied.

Kyle then saw three Kodiaks and two Pelicans break through the winds and head towards the mountain. One of the Kodiaks and Pelicans flew their position while the others continued to the back

entrance.

"Pile out! Go! Go!" Falana ordered Tangilanu, La Rosa and Resolme. The ramp lowered and the three stormed out into the frozen tundra. The Pelican and Kodiak also unloaded their troops, a mixture of ONI marines and the _Tokyo_'s marine detachment, as Tangilanu took point to open the door.

"All clear, Nolan?" Falana asked.

Kyle quickly scanned around the area. The lack of thermal vision wasn't helping their visibility, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

"Looks good to me," he replied.

"Alright. How good are you both at sprinting?" she said looking at him and Beckett.

Kyle shrugged. "I'm not the fastest, but-"

"Well get better at it," she interrupted. "Once we're in, our priority is to detain Parker and 'Seva alive. I don't care how you get past whoever's in your way as long as you find them. Got it?"

Beckett nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Kyle took an extra second to plot out the course of action. They had no idea what the layout was like other than it was probably similar to most every other colonial outpost in the galaxy. It would be more of a problem if they had Mgalekolo to deal with too. Still, they were ODS for a reason. If they couldn't charge headlong into improbable odds to accomplish a difficult task, why were they in this division to begin?

"Yeah. I got it," Kyle finally answered.

"The door's breached!" Tangilanu called over the TEAMCOM as the marines poured into the base.

"Go!" Falana said running out of the Broadfin with the two of them quickly following behind. Kyle put an arm over his visor to keep the large chunks of snow from blocking his view, unfolding his Tempest submachine gun as he ran. The remaining marines entered in and gunfire echoed from inside. Oh goodie—more fun.

The three of them then entered the base, weaving past the marines in the back as the rest engaged the merc forces. A grenade exploded ahead of them, punching a hole into a line of Covenant Storm Kig-Yar blocking the way.

"Don't stop," Falana said back to the other two adding her own suppressing fire with the rest of the squad. Two more Kig-Yar fell, forcing the remaining mercs to retreat further into the base.

The three of them pushed ahead with the other marines laying cover fire against the mercs. Kyle ducked behind a row of crates as plasma and mass effect round zipped over his head. He fired back at his attackers, nicking one in the shields but doing little else. He

didn't have time to waste with these jokers. His eyes darted across the room looking for his targetsâ€¦

"There!" Beckett shouted pointing across the room. A group of human and Turian mercs were clustered around a figure in the middle as they fought their way to the back exit. Kyle could make out that the figure was a Kig-Yar, which meant it had to be 'Seva.

"Go around the right side," he instinctively ordered the other two. "I'll head them off."

"Nolan, wait!" Falana shouted, but to no avail as he darted between a line of crates ahead of him. He didn't need Falana to disagree with him. He had everything under-

A large plasma round struck him right in the side at that moment. His shield took the brunt of the blast, but it knocked him off his feet onto the ground. More gunfire whizzed over him as he caught his breath.

"Kyle!" Beckett shouted.

"I'm fine!" He groaned. "Keep going!"

The gunfire gradually diminished and he could hear the mercs retreating from the marines. Kyle quickly got to his feet and continued his pursuit, spraying rounds from his Tempest for cover. He could see the group guarding 'Seva up ahead. Beckett and Falana emerged from the other side and shot at the group, nailing a Batarian in the head. The others turned their attention to shoot back at them.

Kyle then got an idea.

"Asha," he said priming a flashbang grenade. "When I give the word, tackle that Kig-Yar bastard."

"Got it!" She eagerly replied.

He rounded a corner and threw the grenade at the merc group's feet.

"Shield your eyes!" He called out to the women.

He did so right as the grenade went off, eliciting groans and shouts from the mercs. He then spotted 'Seva trying to flee.

"Now!"

He wished he could have been in Beckett's position to see the look on that sorry alien's face as she rushed forward and leapt at him with all her might. They collided with a loud smack and landed hard onto the ground.

And now to mop up the rest of the mess!

Following Kyle's cue, Falana and him hosed bullets into merc guards. Blood and armor chunks hit the walls as they were torn to pieces by the combined firepower. It was a sad sight, but it was the only option.

As the last guard fell, Beckett sat up and knocked 'Seva out cold with a punch to the beak. She stood up with a relieved sigh and cracked her knuckles.

"And I decided not to try out for Lutaball," she joked looking to Kyle with what was likely a cocky smirk under her helmet.

Before he could joke back, a Covenant Storm Sangheilli emerged from the exit with a energy sword primed to stab Beckett. Time slowed down as Kyle instinctively lifted his Tempest to defend herâ€|

â€|but thankfully a well timed sniper shot pierced through the bastard's eye. The Sangheilli collapsed to the ground as Beckett finally saw what could have been a near fatal incident.

"You're welcome again!" La Rosa shouted from the other side of the room.

"Status report," Falana said to the nearest ONI marine as the rest gathered around them.

"All tingos are down. No casualties," the marine replied.

"Good. Detain 'Seva and bring him to the Pelican."

Three ONI marines remained to take 'Seva back outside as Falana led everyone else through the exit. Kyle was surprised how much these people wanted to keep these punks alive, but who was he to question ONI's motives? They must really want to slam these guys with legal shit!

The group made their way down the hallway, watching each other's backs for any surprises. Eventually, they reached an exit leading to the lower level the other marines were securing. Gunfire and plasma shots were heard ahead of them, prompting

"Go go!," she said opening the door and lifting her weapon to engage.

Which seemed to be for nothing, as they watched some ONI marines gun down the remaining resisting mercs. Kyle quickly checked the room to see if they missed anything, but it was hard to imagine that. Multiple merc bodies laid strewn across the floor as _Tokyo_ marines secured weapon stashes, disabled enemy vehicles parked down on a lower floor and detained the few surrendering mercs. He was impressed. This operation went smooth as peanut butterâ€|well, not chunky peanut butter at least. Even the couple Storm mercs who weren't killed averted the ONI marines' intimidating gaze.

One of the marines turned as Falana entered and waved her over. "All clear," he called out.

Falana lowered her weapon and ordered their own ONI marines to assist the lockdown. Kyle looked over to make a headcount of his own squad and the _Tokyo's_ marines while Falana talked to her people. From what he saw, everyone was there and accounted for. A few minor injuries perhaps, but nothing too intense.

Tangilanu whistled behind him. "Messy, messy, messy," the Tongan

joked seeing several merc corpses torn to shreds nearby.

"I literally think there's not an ounce of blood left to spill here," La Rosa added.

The observations were cut short as Falana turned to everyone else. "Has anyone got a visual on Parker dead or alive?"

Looks like they weren't done yet!

"Negative," Kyle replied after checking with his squad.

"Damn it! Fan out and check every room, bodies and corner you see. Find him alive if possible."

Kyle and Beckett went to check the vehicles while everyone else went about searching. There weren't many places to hide, but that didn't mean Parker couldn't find one that was out of their knowledge. The other marines flipped over corpses and checked any corners they may have overlooked.

Beckett then pointed to a door up ahead of them and turned to an ONI marine. "Was that door locked when you got here?"

The marine did a double take as he saw the red holographic lock. "We torched that room when we first got here! So no!"

It dawned on them to check that room again.

"Follow me," he ordered Beckett and the nearby marines around them.

The group surrounded the door as a marine checked the lock.

"Think you can break it?" Kyle asked.

"Gimme me a sec!" the marine replied.

"What's going on over there?" Falana asked over TEAMCOM.

"There's a sealed door that wasn't sealed earlier," Kyle replied.

There was a pause before her reply. "Roger that. We're on our way."

Kyle personally hoped they could resolve this before Falana arrived. He wanted to show her how he could take charge in this situation.

"Got it," the marine said as the lock switched green. "Here it goes."

Everyone raised their weapons as the door retracted.

"Don't come in," a voice inside shouted back at them.

The room was a small storage area with vehicle parts piled up near large crates lined along the back. A human and Batarian merc, along with a Sangheilli Storm merc, stood with their weapons raised in

defense. Another human stood behind them with a pistol pointed to his head. From what Kyle could see, it was definitely Parker.

"Garrett Parker," Kyle called out to him. "You are under arrest for drug and human trafficking-"

"Shut up!" Parker shouted as he jammed the pistol further into his temple. The other marines hesitated but kept their trigger fingers calm.

"Put the gun down, Parker," Beckett said. "We won't shoot unless given a reason to defend ourselves."

"You don't think this is me defending myself?" Parker replied back shaking his head. "Noâ€|no, this is exactly what she wants isn't it?"

Kyle raised an eyebrow, discreetly folding his submachine gun back on his hip. "What does who want?"

"She wants to watch me dieâ€|she wants to see me beg for my lifeâ€|well, that's not going to happen. I'm not giving her the satisfaction," Parker rambled.

"There's no reason to worry, Parker," Beckett reassured. "You will be under ONI jurisdiction for the durat-"

"Shut up! Shut up, shut up shut up!" Parker shouted. "You ONI types are a bunch of shit eating liars! You tell me all is fineâ€|"

Kyle used the time between Parker's ranting to unfold his pistol. From the corner of his eye, the reflection from a marine's visor showed Falana and the other soldiers heading their way. He plotted out his next move carefully as he tuned back into the conversation.

"Just let me goâ€|" Parker pleaded. "Let me go, and you'll never hear from me again. Pleaseâ€|don't make me-"

Then he spotted Falana and the other marines come into view. "Hey!" He shouted drawing attention away from Kyle and the others.

It was now or neverâ€|

Kyle aimed from his hip and struck Parker's wrist, causing him to scream and drop the pistol to the ground. Before the other mercs could react, Kyle let off a second shot and struck the Sangheilli in the hip. The merc howled and collapsed holding its wound. The other mercs panicked and their weapons shook in their hands.

"Drop your guns now!" Kyle shouted. "I won't ask again!"

After a few more seconds of tense silence, the Batarian threw his gun to the ground. "Screw this!" He said raising his hands up. He turned to the confused human merc. "Better them than us," the Batarian noted looking back at Parker.

The human merc realized what he meant, then threw his gun down as well. "Yeahâ€|yeah, ok. I give too," he said raising his hands.

Falana pushed past Kyle and Beckett to see Parker trying to reach for his fallen pistol. She blew a hole into its chamber with her own gun to ensure it was completely unusable.

"Bring them in," she ordered the group. ONI and _Tokyo_ marines flooded into the room, restraining Parker and the mercs. She turned to Kyle, who expected her to give him a 'well done.'

Instead, she pointed directly into his visor. "That was reckless. You could have killed him."

He brushed her hand away. "I didn'tâ€|so there."

After a lingering glare, she walked back to help bring Parker out. Kyle and Beckett left the room to meet back up with their squad, who were checking out the scene behind them.

"What's her problem?" Tangilanu said to Kyle.

"No idea," Kyle replied, "Not my problem thoughâ€|"

...

Kyle and Ralston followed Ackerson and Falana through the _Mare Erythraeum's_ CIC_. It had been an hour since they left Mavigon and they were still under ONI's thumb. They hadn't even left the system without ONI wanting to double-check every little detail. And now Ackerson had specifically requested them to accompany her onto her ship for some reason yet undisclosed. It made Kyle uneasy.

Surely his little disarming act hadn't rubbed them that badly. He stopped Parker from shooting himself and it made the other mercs surrender too. Hell, he took out a whole fleet of vehicles practically by himself. He shouldn't have to explain himself to them.

The group eventually reached a darkened room. In the center was a large circular platform with control panels and computer wirings intertwined into the walls. Kyle recognized it pretty quickly as a Quantum Entanglement Communicator, but it was more powerful and complex than any he had seen. Must be part of those ONI perks.

"Gentlemen," Ackerson said to the two of them pointing to the platform, "Stand here please."

The two of them did as they were told, standing behind Falana while Ackerson checked with her personal comm.

"Have you got everything you need?" she spoke to an unknown person on the other line. "â€|good. Bring them in."

Kyle turn to Ralston with a look of 'Why are we here?' Ralston promptly replied with a look of 'Why are you asking me?'

Ackerson then stepped onto the platform next to Falana, adjusting her outfit and straightening her hair for a more authoritative look.

"Relaying connection through the _SSV_ _Mogadishu_ in three, Major Ackerson," a voice spoke through the intercom.

"Thank you, Samuel," Ackerson replied. "We're ready."

The platform lit up and a cylinder web of white lines raised around them. The view of the room disappeared under a wall of static that slowly buffered a new image.

"Think this will take long?" Ackerson asked Falana.

"If it all goes well, not long as all," Falana replied.

With another quick glance back to Kyle, Ralston finally decided to ask the burning question. "What would you like us to do, ma'am?"

"Just look tough and follow my lead, Captain," Ackerson replied.

This didn't ease Kyle's concerns. He was sure they were in for some tense talk with Command, the brass or ONI's HQ.

Instead, the image was the center of another merc base like the one they fought in earlier. This one, however, was much better organized and not erupting in violence. About a dozen men and women were scattered in front of them, dressed up in uniforms much less casual than the previous mercs.

It was the woman directly in front of Ackerson that caught Kyle's attention though. She was an older woman, with her long grey hair tied in a bun. She wore a black outfit that seemed like a weird blend of a formal dress and a combat suit. She had an assault rifle holstered on her back like the other mercs, but no one was in an attack stance—yet.

"Hello again, Major," the older woman said smiling.

"Helena Blake," Ackerson greeted her.

"I see I've been denied the opportunity to meet in person once again, though you brought quite a party this time."

Kyle thought she meant him and Ralston, but then he took another look around. Surrounding the merc group was a whole platoon of ONI marines. So this was more hostile than he assumed.

"Not much of a deal if there isn't an audience," Ackerson replied. "And it takes more than a few people to set up this communication." Seeing at the portable holographic hub beneath them, Kyle didn't doubt that.

"Well regardless, I owe you a debt of gratitude," Helena said. "Do you have them with you?"

Ackerson put her fingers to her comm.. "Bring them in," she said.

'Seva and Parker were then pushed cuffed and bloodied through the wall of digital imagery. They weren't bloodied when the soldiers

brought them on the ship. He suspected they were interrogated for information before this meeting.

"Is it finished?" Helena asked.

"All of their assets have been seized, their connections to the Covenant Storm are severed and any remaining members are running scared," Ackerson reassured. "Yesâ€|they're finished."

Helena smiled and glared down at the two former syndicate heads. "Missed me, boys?"

The two didn't look up at her. Kyle figured she had a lot more power over these two, probably as a former employerâ€|maybe even a partner.

After having her chance to gloat, the woman looked back to Ackerson. "Well then, let's be done with this mess."

Ackerson turned back to Kyle. "Kill them," she ordered.

That took him by surprise. Were they even allowed to execute prisoners like this? He turned to Ralston, who avoided Kyle's look while masking his own confusion.

"Do it," she demanded more firmly.

This didn't seem right, but he couldn't compromise an ONI officer's authority in the middle of this situation. He wasn't going to win an argument here, so it was time to play the executionerâ€|

Without a word, he pulled out his pistol and shot Parker in the head. Blood splattered through the digital column as Parker's body collapsed. He then put another round into 'Seva's head with similar results. And like that, Kyle had committed his first executions in some years. He holstered his pistol and returned to his 'look tough' position.

"Like we promised," Ackerson said.

"Leave it to ONI do a job so well," Helena said pleased. "With my former partners dead, the syndicate is mine once again."

"They deserved to die," Ackerson said crossing her arms. "Now, are we going to have any further problems?"

"Not if I can help it. I hope I've presented myself as a far lesser evil than those men. With no further contentions in leadership, the syndicate will restrict itself to gambling and smuggling technology. There will be no drug or slave trading under my watch."

"There most certainly won't," Ackerson said giving a nod to the ONI marine next to her.

Behind Helena, two marines quickly and forcibly subdued the mercs watching her back. Helena looked around baffled as her remaining mercs and the other marines drew weapons at each other. Kyle and Ralston were surprised by the turn of events.

"What's going on?" Helena asked concerned.

"As much as I've enjoyed aiding in your affairs, I'm an Alliance officer first and foremost," Ackerson said putting her arms back down. "Letting you go would be a violation of Council and Alliance law, especially with such a blunt confession to keep committing crimes."

Helena laughed semi-amused to mask her surprise. "I can't believe you place such a high priority on stopping such petty, victimless crimes."

"You're arguing semantic, Helena. 'Petty, victimless crimes' are just as likely to interfere with Alliance operations as they would personal affairs. It's counterproductive for me to turn a blind eye."

"Would it look good on ONI's reputation to go back on their word?"

"The extent of my word was fulfilled with Parker and 'Seva's deaths."

Helena was starting to see that Ackerson was not going to back down so easily. "You wouldn't have found them without me. I gave you their coordinates-

"No," Ackerson interrupted. "You gave coordinates to ONE base." She pointed to Kyle, Ralston and Falana. "My marines fought with blood and sweat to find the other without any hint of the resistance they would face."

"Iâ€¦I knew you could handle whatever they threw at you."

"Putting lives at jeopardy is still inexcusable, Helena. No cost is worth that risk."

"You put an end to a horrid syndicate that exploited profits through inhumane crimes. You weakened crime across the sector for what may be years to come."

"I'm still waiting to be convinced," Ackerson said coldly.

Helena unfolded her assault rifle in anticipation. The ONI marines took a step forward, causing the mercs around her to cower. "I would die before I go to prison. I would most certainly kill everyone of your men before going to prison."

"Bold words," Ackerson said looking to the other mercs. "How about the rest of you? Are you willing to die for this woman?"

Kyle spotted at least three mercs visibly hesitating from her question. The ONI soldiers had already forced them into this situation, so they knew these guys were not to be trifled with. He doubted that they would last long even if they wanted to fight.

Sweat formed along Helena's brow as she glared at Ackerson. "â€¦we had a deal," she pleaded.

"We did," Ackerson replied unsympathetically.

"I'm not going to beg."

"I don't want you to. I want you to convince me. Convince me why I should let you and your band of misfits leave this room alive...and then I want you to beg."

The two stared each other down. Even though Kyle was physically in the room, he could cut the tension with a knife. He watched as Helena's mind whirled thinking of a way to get out of this situation.

"Can't think of anything?" Ackerson said. "Well thenâ€¦perhaps I should propose my own terms."

Helena didn't argue.

"No objections? â€¦good," Ackerson said looking around the base before locking eyes back with Helena. "This syndicate will be disbandedâ€¦effective immediately. Not a tragic loss if you think about it. Your partners already sullied its reputation in the eyes of potential clients and I highly doubt the Storm will forgive their debt to them any time soon."

Helena didn't reply.

"You will be under ONI custody and questioned to root out any remaining cohorts tying you to this syndicate. Once you've done so, you will be reassigned to a location of our choosing in the Terminus Systems. You will be supplied new identities under an organization of our construct. In exchange, you will use any and all remaining connections, on top of acquiring new ones, to monitor operations and relay intel in your sector worth interest to the Alliance. If you are compromised, our government will disavow you. However, exceptional work will allow gradual autonomy of your organization under careful surveillance."

Kyle could see Helena soak in the information before answering. "You want me to become a mole?" She said.

"Yes," Ackerson replied. "Compared to death or incarceration, I would say it's your best option right now."

After a few more seconds of thinking, Helena sighed and folded back her assault rifle. "Very wellâ€¦" She lifted her hand up and the other mercs also holstered their weapons. The ONI marines kept their weapons out but eased out of their attack stance. The two mercs pinned to the ground were also allowed to get back to their feet.

"You drive a hard bargain, Major," Helena said glumly.

"There was no bargaining here, Helena," Ackerson replied to her. "You voluntarily agreed to become an asset to human interests. The Alliance will not overlook that or fail to reward your charitable act."

"Twisted words and false statements."

"It's what we do best." Ackerson looked to the nearby marine again.

"Meers, take Ms. Blake and her men to the _Mogadishu_ immediately. If anyone resists, shoot them."

"Yes, ma'am," Meers replied.

Ackerson looked back to Helena one last time. "Enjoy your new life, Helena."

The last thing Kyle saw before the image was disconnected was Helena's angry but defeated glare as the marines herded her and the mercs out of view.

The energy web from the QEC faded back into the platform, leaving Kyle, Ralston, Falana and Ackerson alone in the dark room with two bleeding corpses on the ground.

Ackerson glanced at the corpses before looking back to Kyle. "Clean kills," she observed. "Glad to know you can follow orders."

"â€|thanks," Kyle said not sure if it was meant to be a compliment.

The lights flipped on and the doors opened. Ackerson led Kyle and the group outside as marines collected the corpses.

"That took longer than I expected," Ackerson said to Falana.

"We got the job done," Falana reassured. "Not much more to ask for than that."

"I suppose," Ackerson said. She turned back to see Kyle visibly concerned about what he just did. "Something on your mind, lieutenant?"

Kyle watched the marines carrying out Parker and 'Seva's bodies before turning to the major. "Not to openly question your judgment ma'am, but was that necessary?"

"Given the circumstances, yes. Not my ideal method, but there were no suitable alternative."

"Why is that? I mean, it's against Alliance protocol to-"

"Kyleâ€|" Ralston muttered to stop him.

"Let the lieutenant speak," Falana said silencing the captain before looking back to Kyle. "You were saying?"

Kyle fumbled with what he was supposed to say next. "Iâ€|uh, I just felt badâ€|for a moment."

Ackerson crossed her arms and looked directly into Kyle's eyes. It was still unnerving.

"I understand your concern, lieutenant," she said. "You're career ODS and even by your standards that was a questionable order to ask of you. Unfortunately, scumbags like Helena Blake are more paranoid than you or I. They need proof and she wouldn't be satisfied unless she saw them die herself. It was the only way she'd let the

Mogadishu's troops into her base without a fight. I wouldn't have been able to make my move otherwise."

"I understand ma'am and I really appreciate how much you thought it out," Kyle added. "I just don't prefer doing executions."

"Though you've clearly done it before," she noted. "Those were precise killing shots."

He didn't reply. She was right; it wasn't his first.

"If I can help ease your moral crisis, lieutenant," she continued. "Men like those two have committed crimes far outweighing what we did to them. Even if they were processed like normal criminals, the time spent on court cases with even a chance to get the death penalty would waste everyone's time. So in a way, we saved the Alliance taxpayers an unneeded expense."

That wasn't entirely reassuring, but Kyle wouldn't win this discussion anyway. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Regardless," she said to Ralston, "I'm grateful to have your help for this operation."

"Our pleasure, Major," Ralston replied. "Let us know if we can do anything else."

"Actually, I'm going to need you to return to the Citadel with us."

"Ma'am?"

"We have a ship full of prisoners onboard. It's protocol to have an escort accompanying us so they're brought into custody. And there are a few things we need to discuss before putting this affair to rest."

"It would conflict with our rendezvous with Fifth Fleet."

"I already have Admiral Hackett's permission, so you're good," she promptly replied. "We're leaving in five minutes. I suggest you return to your ship as soon as possible."

The Major then left, probably to boss around more people.

Falana turned to Kyle and Ralston with a gracious nod. "It's been a pleasure serving with you both," she said before leaving as well.

"I guess we're showing ourselves the door," Ralston said after an awkward pause before leading the way to the airlock.

This whole thing was strange to Kyle. Is this how ONI dealt with all their proceedings? Was this meant to intimidate or scare them? What else did they need to discuss? He wasn't quite sure how to process all of it. He knew ONI were the boogie men of the Alliance Navy, but seeing it for himself was something else entirely.

"What the hell just happened?" He finally asked once they were out of earshot.

"I'm not sureâ€|" Ralston replied. "But it looks like ONI's not done with us yetâ€|"

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Codex Entry (Alliance): The Office of Naval Intelligence a.k.a. ONI

The Office of Naval Intelligence, also known as the Military Intelligence Division, is the intelligence service branch of the Alliance Navy. Formed in 2163 during the days of the UNSC, the branch has proved an invaluable asset to securing battlefield Intel for human forces throughout the centuries.

Though under the current command of Admiral Angus McCallister, ONI still reports directly to Alliance HIGHCOM and operates within establish Council regulations. Their tasks include are wartime propaganda, counter-espionage tactics, covert Intel gathering, internal affairs regulations and other extra-military operations. Outside of Spectres, they are the largest sanctioned autonomous military branch in the Citadel.

The Office of Naval Intelligence has classified additional information concerning the Office of Naval Intelligence's origins and operations.

_ ... _

So it looks like Ackerson is going to stick around for a while longer. I wonder what she has in mind.

You know the drill. Check out my walking dead fanfic through my profile, check out DinoJake's stories on his profile and leave reviews so we can keep making this story better.

Speaking of that, keep reading for my next chapter which I am currently starting. If you thought this character crossover was cool, you haven't seen anything yet!

11. Crossed and Divergent Paths (Part 1)

***Quick note: I may continue to edit these chapters for grammar and phrasing like I am with the previous ones, so don't be surprised if lines or phrases change in the next few days.**

* * *

><p>Life is complicated. I've killed storiesâ€|edited storiesâ€|sold stories (in my dreams). Perhaps now, things will be differentâ€|

** Enough of this rambling! I'm back and I have not one, not two, but THREE complete chapters to make up for my absence. Thank you so much to the fans who have continued following my story and to DinoJake for his feedback and his putting up with my obsessive compulsive proofreading (this went through no fewer than four drafts ending up as a final forty-two page document).**

** A few plugs first before we start. Along with my currently on hold

Walking Dead fanfic A Life of Service, I have started writing a new story centered on Telltale's The Wolf Among Us game that I feel has some of my best writing to date. Or at least I am just very proud of how it has been shaping so far. Check out ****The Heart Made of Clay**** in the games section under The Wolf Among Us and let me know what you think.**

** I've also started a new blog called ****Gut Reaction Reviews**** where, along with posting my own thoughts on all things media, I am doing a podcast with several friends about everything we have watched recently. Check out the blog here: **

Or, skip straight to my Soundcloud account for the podcast here: /justin-zarian

** Lastly, go check out DinoJake's ****The Last Spartan**** if you haven't yet!**

And with that, let's return to our story. When we last left Kyle and the squad, they had successfully done A Hostile Takeover and are returning to the Citadel with ONI's Danielle Ackerson. This chapter is a much more leisurely in comparison, but be prepared for what is the first official crossover with multiple characters from this story and **The Last Spartan****! Essentially, it's the stuff certain members of Chief's squad did in TLS while he was fighting Doctor Heart and the Flood, but with my guys involved. Enjoy! **

* * *

><p>...<p>

1115 Hours, March 1st 2683

Office of Naval Intelligence Headquarters

Citadel

Widow System, Serpent Nebula

...

Kyle always assumed the Office of Naval Intelligence had a Citadel Headquarters, but, like everything ONI, he knew its location was kept on the down low. Not that anyone would assume this outlet was a headquarters from the outside, as it had no discernible logos or markings. To be fair, with the kind of friends and enemies ONI made, he couldn't blame them for discretion.

And now he was sitting in its main lobby, waiting for what was supposed to be an 11:00 AM meeting with Major Ackerson. The flashing 11:15 AM on his omni-tool's clock meant it was going to be a long day. Whatever "pressing concerns" she was dealing were cutting into his own. Maybe he should have taken his time getting here upon retrospect.

He figured there was nothing else to do but wait and people watch. The lobby was awfully quiet and empty, with the only audible noise coming from the nicely groomed lady receptionist answering calls on her console. The fact she could do that while doing what looked like seven different things on her data pad was intriguing.

On the opposite side of the lobby, several ONI officers discussed private matter out of his hearing range. Another group of officers, flanked by ONI marines, exited a hallway to his left without even acknowledging his presence. It felt like no one wanted him here. The feeling was mutual.

He had to be here though. Before the _Tokyo_ docked at the Citadel, Ackerson requested his immediate presence for a "how did she put it? 'An unscheduled formal evaluation.'" Which was strange since the ODST branch conducted evaluations personally. The Major had gotten permission, however, so she was authorized. On the positive side, that meant his next evaluation would be pushed back until much later. On the negative side, he had to wonder why the Major cared. They weren't her responsibility and he was damn sure there was no need for an internal investigation of his squad.

He exhaled loudly and rested his head on the wall behind him. Apparently, ONI's trademark punctuality wasn't a concern if it was in one of their buildings. He figured he could take a catnap while he waited.

"Lieutenant Nolan?" The receptionist called from her desk,

Kyle hesitated at first since she hadn't even looked up from her data pad to call him. After waiting to see if he had misheard her, he walked over to the front of her desk. She still didn't look up from her data pad as he decided to go first.

"Um...yes?" He asked.

"Major Ackerson apologizes for the delay," the receptionist said still not taking her eyes off the damn data pad. "Something urgent came to her attention. It'll only be another ten minutes."

"So, is there something else I should do before then or was that all?"

"That was all. Have a seat in the lobby and I'll let you know when she's ready."

I was just doing that, he thought to himself annoyed. He held back his tongue in case that would be held against him.

"Alright," he groaned as he went back to his chair. The receptionist then took a call on her console and went on as if the conversation never happened.

He sat back in the chair, leaned back and let out another audible groan just to annoy anyone who may have heard him. Anything the rest of his squad was doing right now had to be better than this.

* * *

><p>Engelbrektsson rubbed the back of her neck and smiled feeling the warmth of her newly replaced biotic amp. It hadn't been a fun morning being cooped in the ODST office's biotics bay. Most people would just buy a regular amp from a corner store, but she was a special case. She was an L2 biotic using L3 implants and there was always a risk that the wrong amp could malfunction or have an unforeseen

consequence. So since it was ODSST technicians who did the transition, it would have to be the same who fixed any damages. At least she could trust them not to dick it up!<p>

Whatever the case, she was just happy to be back at full strength. She developed a huge case of cabin fever while everyone else took down the syndicate. The fact that she couldn't help drove her crazy with feelings of uselessness. She knew those feelings weren't real, but not having a single casualty in the quad without her presence didn't help.

So all of that worry, plus a slight dizziness from the amp repair, prompted her to steal away Resolme for some company. He claimed he had nothing urgent to do on the Citadel anyway and it was a convenient excuse to socialize with the greenhorn. There was almost never a bad time to build camaraderie.

They had been quiet for most of their walk to Chora's Den, however, so she figured she should start now.

"So, everything went smoothly during the raid?" She asked.

"Kind of," he replied. "The Captain took me off turret duty before we entered the base, but yeah."

"She took you off turret duty?" She asked amused as they passed the Krogan bouncer in front of the Den. "What is this? Middle school?"

"I had some trouble shooting a Ghost, but I did hit it in the end. It was weird."

"Oh I'm not disagreeing. I'm just surprised she did that is all. I mean hell, it's not like shooting a Scorpion tank."

"Exactly," Resolme said clearly relieved someone else had sympathy for him. "So where should we sit?"

The two of them scanned the area for good spots. The colorful flashing lights and pulsing music sent shivers down Engelbrektsson's spine as her new amp adjusted to the sensory input. If that wasn't more of an excuse for a stiff drink than she had alreadyâ€¦

"How about there?" She said pointing to some empty chairs on the opposite side of the center circular bar. Resolme offered no complaints.

"So why are we drinking so early?" Resolme asked as they walked over and sat down.

"One," Engelbrektsson replied. "Nothing builds camaraderie like sharing a drink. Two, my brain is tweaked on biotic energy so it'll help me settle down. And three, because why the hell not? We're not fighting or training today, so we might as well enjoy a drink. Screw the time of day." She decided to shift subjects. "So you said your brother and sister are serving too, right?"

"Oh yeah. Tomasi's on the _Shanghai_ and Lavania was just transferred to the _Kilimanjaro_."

Engelbrektsson whistled lightly. "They must be pretty good to get those postings."

"Hell yeah. Both of them graduated in the top percentile of their tech classes. The _Kilimanjaro's_ XO personally requested Lavania after hearing about her work on the _Agincourt_."

"What did she do that made her so special?"

"I don't know. She was too excited about the promotion to explain why she got it."

They chuckled as a human waitress came to take their order.

"Hi there," the waitress said cheerfully. "Welcome to Chora's Den. What would you like today?"

"Well, uhâ€¦" Engelbrektsson replied looking at her nametag. "â€¦Jenna, what's good and strong today?"

"Good is relative," Jenna teased back. "I'd stay away from the whiskey though. Our last batch has gotten some complaints."

"It's not my poison of choice anyway. Any good vodka drinks?"

"Our drink of the day is the Atomic Blue. It's a mix of vodka, tonic, Tupari, a hint of rum and a blueberry juice base."

"Go light on the Tupari, but make mine a double."

"Alright," Jenna said turning to Resolme. "And for you, sir?"

"What's your beer selection?" He asked.

"Heineken and Shayzor."

"The Asari beer? Never tried that before. What do you think?" He asked Engelbrektsson.

"Never tried it either," she said shrugging. "Go ahead and roll the dice."

"Alright. I'll take that."

"I'll bring those right out," Jenna said before walking to the other side of the bar.

"Just beer?" Engelbrektsson asked.

"I'm not in the mood to get hammered," Resolme replied.

"Well Shayzor's not exactly a light beer."

"You said you never tried it."

"Yeah, but you can know about something you've never tried."

"Then I'll drink lightly," he said as he observed the club. "So how come we didn't go to Flux instead?"

"Their alcohol selection isn't as good," she replied. "And that Volus owner keeps bugging me to play Quasar. Give me actual Blackjack any day. Why do you ask?"

"This isn't really a safe club," he said noting some of the surly looking people sitting at nearby tables. "Playing Liar's Dice here with the lieutenant is one thing, but it feels like people want to shoot me in the back."

"Come back to me after you've visited Noveria," she teased. "Then we can talk about shady shit. And hey, if they give you a nasty look, throw it right back at them. No one's messing with an ODSF at this hour."

As she finished that sentence, someone sat in the open seat to her right. It was definitely a human, but she didn't bother to see whom. She figured it was just some regular.

"So how much did it suck not being able to fight?" Resolme asked her.

She sighed as she leaned onto the bar counter. "A lotâ€|at least you guys had fun though."

"Not really," he confessed. "I'm happy no one died, but it sucks not having your biotic shield for extra protection."

She was happy someone missed her presence, but she wasn't going to turn soft that quickly. "Well stop putting your ass in the line of fire and you wouldn't need that shield all the time," she joked.

"Yeah," he sighed. "I'm going to get you killed some day."

"Oh, don't be hard on yourself. Beckett's still alive because of you, so I'm sure you'll save my ass sometime soon too."

"Yeahâ€|"

Jenna then arrived with their drinks. "There we go. Let me know if I can bring anything else."

"Thanks," Engelbrektsson said looking at the turquoise colored drink curiously. An Atomic Blue, huh? She would have to judge how 'atomic' it really was.

"Hi," Jenna then said to the person next to her. "Sorry, I'll be with you in a sec."

"I'll wait right here," a raspy but soft-spoken voice replied.

Engelbrektsson's ears perked up hearing the man's voice. It sounded familiar, but she couldn't place where. She sipped her drink as she decided to continue eavesdropping. Thankfully, the drink was strong enough that she could take her time.

"â€|why do I get the feeling you're not here to order drinks?" Jenna said to the man curiously.

"Sorry," the man said. "I don't want to take up too much of your time, but I need to talk about your work with C-Sec?"

"C-Sec?" Resolme said voicing both his and Engelbrektsson's surprise.

"I don't know what you people are talking about," Jenna said feigning ignorance unconvincingly. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to my other customers."

"This isn't a game, Jenna," the man said more seriously. "These people are dangerous."

"Now you sound like my sister! Why is everyone so concerned about me? I can take care of myself. I need to go. I'm not a stripper. I don't get paid to stand around and look pretty."

"Wait—" the man said trying to stop her before she stormed off to the other side of the bar. "—great..."

Engelbrektsson figured it was time to pretend to be eavesdropping and see who this person was. She turned to him and went wide-eyed. Even after all these years, she knew exactly who that face and gelled looking hair belonged to.

"Kaidan?"

The man turned to her with equal surprise. "Julianne?"

Sure enough, this guy was Kaidan Alenko. She was surprised he remembered her. Everyone at BAaT knew who he was after he killed that Turian trainer Vyrnnus, but she rarely talked to him personally outside of a few chitchats. She never forgot his face though, even after all these years. It was nice to see he was still a good looking person as an adult too.

"You guys know each other?" Resolme asked confused.

"Yeah," Engelbrektsson replied. "Kaidan and I were in the 'Grunt Hole' together."

Flashes of memories arose in the back of her mind. Times spent together with all of the kids after lights out. All the tests the Turian teachers pushed them through. Her friend Desirae and her playing tricks on some of the boys. It had been so long since she had pushed those aside, but here they were flooding her mind. She did her best to hold them back as Kaidan nodded to her armor.

"You with the Citadel's ODSST detachment?" He said noting her insignia.

"Nope," she replied. "Shore leave. We just busted a system spanning red sand syndicate and took on a Covenant Storm battalion."

"Always knew you'd go the wild route."

"And I see you went for the straight marine route," she said also noting his Alliance marine insignia. "What ship are you on?_ Jakarta? Cairo?_"

"â€|actually," he said not wanting to say it out loud. "The _Normandy._"

She was impressed. That was the last ship she expected him to be a part of.

"You meanâ€|like, the _Normandy _withâ€|"

"Yeah," Kaidan said finishing her thought. "The same one."

"Holy shit," Resolme said impressed. "Well, what are you doing here?"

"It'sâ€|don't worry about it," Kaidan replied. "You don't need to get involved."

"You throw around a word like 'C-Sec' and expect me not think it's a big deal?" Engelbrektsson said. "Give me more credit than that."

"Alright," Kaidan said with a sigh as he went to a whisper. "That bartender is a C-Sec undercover agent."

"For real?" Resolme said too loud before quieting himself. "She fooled me."

"Why is that a problem?" Engelbrektsson asked.

"I went to Flux earlier today and met her sister. Poor woman's been tearing her hair out worrying for her safety. Can't blame her," he said noticing some creepy looking people catcalling at Jenna. "She wanted me to convince Jenna to leave, but she didn't mention it would be thisâ€|tricky."

Engelbrektsson glanced over to see Jenna serving some other customers. This girl seemed to be pretty good at her job if she was a C-Sec agent, but maybe it wouldn't be bad to get away from here. The catcalling alone would've driven any woman crazy.

"So how do we convince her to leave?" She asked Kaidan.

"I said you don't need to get involved," He reiterated.

"And I say this isn't coincidence meeting like this. Besides, three heads are better than one. You in, Resolme?"

Resolme hesitated at first as he took another drink of his beer, gagging slightly at the Shayzor's after taste, but he nodded in agreement.

"There we go," Engelbrektsson said eagerly. "It'll be like old times."

"Persistent as always," Kaidan said resigned. "Alright, but let me take charge here. I don't want to cause problems for anyone"

"Good, because I'm a problem magnet," Engelbrektsson said as she chugged her drink. The vodka burned her throat, but her head did feel better now.

"Don't I know it," Kaiden joked as they paid for their drinks and started leaving.

So, looks like they were going to do some investigating. It sounded a lot better than what she had planned for the day and it'd be a good excuse to catch up with Kaidan. Though they still had no leads on how to convince Jenna.

Right as they were about to leave, some Turian jackass bumped right into Kaidan and her. Rather than apologize though, the Turian leaned in between them.

"If you've got questions about Jenna, meet me at C-Sec academy," he whispered sternly.

"What did you say?" Resolme asked trying to get in on the conversation.

Instead of repeating himself, the Turian pushed Kaiden and Engelbrektsson out of the way.

"Push off!" He said putting on a very fake drunk accent. "I never did nothing to you guys. Damn newcomers. Think they can run the place." He then stumbled with a fake drunk walk to the bar, though not before giving Resolme a discreet stink eye on the way.

"The hell was that about?" Resolme asked.

"I guess we should find out," Kaidan said leading them out of the bar...

* * *

><p>"Come in, lieutenant."<p>

Major Ackerson invited Kyle inside as she sat behind a very nice silver and white desk. Her office was very ornate compared to the staleness everywhere else in the building, though it wasn't much bigger than Ralston's on the _Tokyo_. There were several paintings along the wall, some silver themed furniture, a large console on the left wall and other assorted things to make it look livable. A music player accompanied all this by softly playing modern orchestral music in the background. There was also some bust next to the door, but Kyle didn't recognize who it was other than the base reading 'James Ackerson' on it. Not too shabby an office.

"Nice place," he said sitting in his chair as she minimized several screens on her desk's terminal.

"It suits my needs," she said with that same neutral voice as always. "It's nice having a place to call 'home,' even if it's a glorified broom closet. What's your home like?"

"Don't really have one. I'm in space too often to have a permanent residence."

"So where do you stay during your time off?"

"I stay with my family when I'm on Earth. The headquarters here has a

place for soldiers too."

"Hmâ€¦I wouldn't take a man of your rank to be a couch surfer."

He wasn't sure the connotation of that remark, so he held his tongue should he say anything he regretted. Not a great way to start off.

"My apologies," she said noticing his reaction. "I meant no disrespect. I just assumed a 'lifer' like yourself would have a stable residence."

"Nope," he said holding his annoyance back.

The Major leaned forward onto the desk. "It's unfortunate starting off on the wrong foot, isn't it? My behavior yesterday was no better. All of that wasâ€¦uncommon for me."

"I thought casual murder was standard here," he said before he could stop himself. He had gotten too comfortable mouthing off to Ralston and Anderson.

"Thankfully not, but sometimes we have to play the roles to accomplish our goals," she said leaning back in her chair. "You of all people should know that. ODST play all kinds of roles out in the field. Soldier, good cop, bad cop, negotiator...interrogator," she said pointedly.

"Sometimes," he replied crossing his arms.

"Finding someone who can interrogate without resorting to physical violence or other abuse is actually quite rare. Your work with Dalamar is a fine example. Helena thought she could lead us on a wild goose chase, but I'm glad people like you proved her wrong."

"â€¦thanks?" He said still trying to get a read on her intentions.

"It's a genuine compliment," she said countering his concern. "And on that note, I should apologize for yesterday too."

"Hm?"

"When I ordered you to execute Parker and 'Seva. It was an abuse of my authority."

He sighed thinking about that. It had been on the back of his mind for the last day, largely because it could lead to a prison sentence.

"I've been playing my role in that operation for too long," she continued. "Dealing with scum like Helena makes you forget how much you can force someone's hand."

"So how would you go about not getting me court marshaled?" He asked.

"To the point. I like that. Well, you acted under my authority in a now highly classified operation. Everyone in your squad will go

unnamed in the report and the deaths were noted an hour before the execution. Any other loose ends that might implicate you in a negative light have been dealt with too. Simply put, you can't even be threatened with court marshal because you were never there."

"Soâ€¦I got away with murder."

"Getting away with murder is part of the job, lieutenant. No, you followed orders. Besides, how many other men did you kill to reach those guys?"

"â€¦twenty, maybe twenty-two. Hard to tell when you destroy vehicles."

"Exactly," she said as she tapped on her desk terminal. "Everyone's hands are dirty when they work for the armed forces. As long as they look clean, no one really cares."

"Interesting philosophy."

"It's useful."

He sunk into his chair as he eyed her terminal. "Is this all part of the evaluation?"

"Yes," she said matter of fact. "Believe it or not, productive and open communication is a valuable trait for any soldier, especially ODS. It divides the grunts from leaders like you."

Okâ€¦so he kind of got a compliment there. "Soâ€¦why did YOU want to evaluate me?"

"I should be concerned with the well being of all our military branches," she said as she stopped typing. "But more seriously, it's because you're not an average soldier, lieutenant."

"How so, ma'am?"

"Even compared to other 'lifers,' the ways you lead and fight are uncommon. Especially given yourâ€¦condition," she said pointing to his prosthetic hand, which prompted his expected discomfort reaction. "Most soldiers would clone missing limbs rather than stick to a prosthetic. Not you though. There's something different driving you. So I figured I should take this time toâ€¦get to know you. Where it goes from there is to be seen."

"â€¦and where would one of those possible destinations lead to?"

"As I said, it's to be seen."

Great, surprises. What every soldier loves to hear. He figured it could range anywhere between being promoted and being stranded on some remote planet. Guess all he could do was go along with it.

"Are we understood on this?" She asked him.

"I have to do it anyway, so yes ma'am."

"Good," she said as she maximized her previously closed screens. Most

of them were dossiers—more specifically, his team's dossiers. Everyone's photos popped up on the corners as their individual service records and details were uploaded beneath them.

"I'll ask about your service record later," she continued. "—which has been a very interesting read by the way. Right now, I'd like you to account for your current squad."

"Account?"

"Yes. Every soldier should feel directly responsible for the progress and actions of those under their command. Captain Falana's report spoke highly of your team, though she expressed some—concerns about your discipline."

Kyle wasn't happy with having that jerk Falana criticize his leadership, but he kept himself in check. "I can assure you they've been trained to be the best team possible."

"I'm sure of it, and that's why I want you to prove her wrong," she said as she expanded the nearest dossier. "Now, let's start with Operations Chief Beckett—"

* * *

><p>Beckett strolled through the Presidium by herself, soaking in the sights and sounds around her. She didn't know how the rest of her squad felt, but she loved being at the Citadel. She could only dream of being here before joining the corps. Now she regularly visited several times a year. Maybe if she scrapped enough money together, she could move her parents here. It was a fool's dream, but everyone should have at least one.<p>

She rarely had time to admire the specifics of the Presidium, so she figured she should start with the tour guide terminal. She found one nearby and waited until the group of Salarians ahead were done with their business. She then stepped forward, drawing the attention of the purple and pink hologram's freaky soulless eyes.

"Welcome to Presidium Tourism Terminal Two," the V.I. greeted her. "I am Avina and I will be your guide through this section of the Presidium." The V.I. motioned to the huge elevator behind Beckett. "You are standing near the base of the Citadel Tower, one of the Presidium's most recognizable and important structures."

It then motioned to a large statue behind it. "Behind me is the spectacular Relay monument, a scale model representation of a Prothean mass relay."

It then pointed to its right. "To your left is one of the Keepers, the enigmatic caretakers of the Citadel, working on a control panel."

Beckett gave the briefest of glances to the Keeper as she tuned out Avina's boring details. If those things weren't interested in interacting with anyone, she wasn't interested in learning about them.

"Enough Keeper talk," Asha interrupted pointed to the Relay monument. "Tell me about that."

"Please specify your desired subject," Avina asked.

Beckett rolled her eyes. She forgot that non-military V.I.'s couldn't understand contextual clues. "Sorry, please tell me about the Relay monument."

"Discovered by the Asari, who first arrived to the Citadel, the Relay Monument is one of the station's most interesting and controversial features. What is the meaning behind this striking piece of art? Is it a tribute to Prothean vanity, a reminder of their conquest of the galaxy through mass relay technology? Or perhaps it is a symbol of unity, a Prothean acknowledgment that the relays would eventually lead other species here to the Citadel. No one can say for sure, making the Relay Monument a favorite topic of discussion among academics and scholars."

That was more of an art lesson than she needed, but it was intriguing information. So the people who built this were the original trolls of the galaxy, trying to preemptively stump her generation's eggheads over something that probably meant nothing. She had to hand it to the Protheans; they may not be as powerful as the Forerunners, but they had a better sense of humor.

"May I be of further assistance?" Avina asked routinely.

"That's all for now," Beckett replied as she left the terminal.

"Thank you for using Avina. Have a pleasant day," the V.I. said moving into her default 'waiting' position.

Beckett approached the monument's base to admire the craft up close. The statue loomed over the Presidium with an authoritative presence, with its not recently polished metal blocking out the Presidium's artificial sunlight. Part of her wondered if it wasn't an art piece at all. Maybe it was an actual mass relay and no one knew about it. Whatever the case, she wanted to get a holo next to it.

She noticed a pair of Unggoy walking past her jabbering about something excitedly. She pulled out a small portable camera from her armor's back pocket and waved to them.

"Excuse me, sirs," she said.

The Unggoys abruptly about faced. They were diminutive little guys without any combat armor on. They could almost pass for Volus from a certain angle.

"What pretty soldier lady want?" One of them asked.

She admired the compliment, but continued as she pointed to the monument. "Could one of you take a holo with me in front of this?"

"Oh oh!" The other said excitedly waving his hand. "Mu'gee want to take it."

"Back off, numb nuts," the other Unggoy said. "Hordo got better arty eye than you."

Beckett giggled seeing them bicker in a way only Unggoy could. "Maybe we should compromise. Mu'gee can stand next to me and you can take the holo, Hordo."

"Yippie!" Mu'gee squealed waddling next to her.

"Gah!" Hordo exclaimed taking the camera from her.

"Hey, Hordo got better arty eye," Mu'gee teased. "So Hordo get what he ask for."

Hordo grumbled as he pointed the camera at them.

"Here," Beckett said positioning Mu'gee next to her. "Get the monument in between us while we're waving."

"This awesome!" Mu'gee exclaimed as he waved.

Hordo adjusted the camera before giving a hand up to signal he was ready. "Okie dokie! Say 'Nub Nub!'"

"Nub nub!" Beckett and Mu'gee said as Hordo took the holo. She hoped whatever he asked them to say wasn't stupid.

"Super pretty holo for pretty soldier lady," Hordo said giving the camera back to Beckett.

The guy wasn't kidding! The monument loomed majestically behind her and Mu'gee as the artificial sun shone right in between the relay's forked prongs. It was really cool.

"You really have an 'arty eye,'" she said to Hordo as she tapped onto her omni-tool. "Here, you can have a copy. Thanks a bunch."

Hordo whooped as his omni-tool received the transferred photo. "Hordo having happy thoughts tonight!"

"Me want to see," Mu'gee said trying to look over his shoulder.

"Mu'gee get his own," Hordo said running away.

Beckett held back a laugh as they ran off to who knows where. She probably caused them some problems for tonight, but she at least got a holo to send home. Her dad always appreciated the holos whenever he got them. It was her way to make his last memories of her be ones of her living the soldier's dream. Maybe it helped ease the pain a littleâ€|

She pocketed her camera and walked down the path leading away from the monument. She didn't have much scheduled for the shore leave since it was so sudden. She already planned to meet Kyle later to get food and discuss what the Major told him. Otherwise, it may just be another boring day for herâ€|

â€|if some argument nearby hadn't caught her attention.

"I'm telling you, this isn't what Jake would want," a man said.

"Who are you to tell me what my husband would want" A woman shouted back.

"Please!" A filtered female voice said to the others. "There's no need to shout like that."

Beckett turned to see two humans and a female Quarrian gathered in a bench area nearby. The humans glared daggers at each other while the Quarrian tried calming them down. Beckett shouldn't get involved, but her curiosity was getting the better of her. It may have been the fact that a Quarrian was actually at the Presidium. She rarely saw one outside of the Lower Wards.

"I'm the only person making sense right now," the man pleaded to the woman. "You're endangering your baby!"

"This baby is the only thing I have left of Jake," the woman snapped back.

"Michael's just trying to help," the Quarrian interjected. "I know he has your best interests in mind, Rebekah, butâ€"

"How would you know about my best interests?" Rebekah snapped at her. "I don't care what Michael thinks. It's my decision."

"I know you're hurting, Rebekah," Michael said. "But don't let your grief hurt your baby, too! I know the Quarrian agrees with me."

"But Iâ€"

"She doesn't even have the same physiology as us," Rebekah said cutting the Quarrian off again. "What would she understand about gene therapy?"

That caught Beckett's attention too much for her to ignore. She knew it was a bad idea, but she decided to intervene.

"What seems to be the problem?" She asked as she walked to them.

"We don't need any more strangers helping out," Rebekah said. "The Quarrian'sâ€"

"Rebekah, please!" Michael pleaded before turning back to Beckett. "You're human too. Maybe you can talk some sense into her."

"Why wouldn't her opinion be valid?" Beckett said pointing to the Quarrian.

"She's a Quarrian," Rebekah said crossing her arms.

"'She' also happens to be well versed in medical situations," the Quarrian rebuffed annoyed at the implications.

"Everyone's trying to 'talk sense' to me, but I don't want to discuss anything. I'm not undergoing any treatments."

"Look," Michael said to Beckett. "Please excuse my sister-in-law's behavior. She's pregnant and she's refused to let the baby undergo gene therapy in utero. I asked the Quarrian's opinion, but maybe having you both here would be better. Kind of a balancing

act."

"More like bullying," Rebekah said snidely.

Beckett looked to the Quarian, who was clearly flustered over this whole thing. She assumed they had been going in circles like this for a while, so they should get back to the basics.

"Well," Beckett said to the couple. "She might have a good reason for her opinion. I'd like to hear both sides."

"Thank you," Rebekah sighed with relief. "My husband, Jacob, died from a rare heart condition several months ago."

"I'm sorry."

"There's a chance that baby could develop the same heart condition," Michael added. "But routine gene therapy can eliminate it."

"A very small chance," Rebekah added. "And extranet reports say the therapy could harm the child!"

"It's less dangerous than the genetic enhancements people like her get," Michael said noting Beckett's ODST logo.

"I'm not planning on having my child become an ODST junkie," Rebekah said before looking to Beckett. "No offense."

Beckett discreetly rolled her eyes at the remark. The couple continued to argue as the Quarian looked to Beckett.

"See what I've been dealing with," the Quarian said sarcastically.

"You're a lot more patient than me," Beckett whispered back before deciding to get more direct. "Ok, shut up both of you!"

The two of them turned surprised to her.

"Sorry," she apologized. "Ok, what are the actual chances that your child will develop the heart condition?"

"According to the doctors," Rebekah said, "There's a one-in-fifty chance. And if my baby develops the condition, medical treatments are available."

"Which is nowhere near as effective as simply getting the therapy," Michael interjected.

"Well then what are the chances gene therapy could hurt the baby?" Beckett directed back at him.

"One-in-three hundred at most," Michael said.

"But extranet articles say there could still be long-term complications we don't know about," Rebekah interjected to him. "Don't you understand? If my baby is that one-in-three hundred, I'll always wonder if I killed my baby for nothing!"

Beckett sighed taking in these facts. She sensed the personal

motivations behind each of their sides. Her mother and her had similar arguments over different treatments for her father. Maybe bringing that up could help though.

"If I could add something," Beckett said collecting her thoughts. "I don't know much about utero science or whatever the hell that stuff is, butâ€|my dad has gone through several gene therapy treatments over the last few years."

"What does he have?" Michael asked.

"No one knows. We've had every doctor we could afford check it out. One guy said it was an unknown cancer strain caused by element zero. One said it was a side effect to plasma exposure. Everyone else said something completely different. Among them were three gene therapists who each tried a series of treatments on him. Some of them helped relieve the symptomsâ€|"

"See!" Michael said to Rebekah.

"But they haven't had any lasting effect," Beckett continued. "I know that's different than testing on a fetus, but these are treatments that have been considered for utero testing."

"Wellâ€|how far along was your father when he got the treatment?" Michael asked clearly trying to find a silver lining.

"When it was first identified, when it became malignant and when we ran out of options. So far, all we've been able to do is slow the disease's progress." Michael seemed disappointed by her answer, so Beckett tried to add some comfort. "I'm not saying it won't work for her child, but the risk is very real."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you too," the Quarrian jumped in. "My people have been experimenting with utero gene therapy for centuries to re-adapt our immune system deficiencies. We've made a lot of progress, but we're no closer to getting out of our suits than when we started."

She looked over to Rebekah before continuing. "No matter the case though, it should always be the parents who should make the choice. It's her child and we should honor her decision."

"Damn it, she's not choosing!" Michael said. "Look, I'm sorry for both of your cases, but she's acting blindly out of grief."

"Well aren't you?" Beckett said.

"I'm trying to keep a level head here," Michael angrily pleaded. "I'm the closest thing to a father this baby is going to have!"

"Then support the baby's mother," the Quarrian said. "Any race would tell you that a father should stand by the mother when she makes the tough decisions."

Michael mood finally sunk. "Thisâ€|this baby is the only thing my brotherâ€|it's all I have left of him. I need to know that the baby's safe."

"It's all I have left too, Michael," Rebekah said with more sympathy

than before.

"I want Jacob's child to be safe. I want to give him that much."

"We will. I promise."

They paused to let the moment sink in. Beckett was surprised things got resolved as nicely as they did. She expected something more explosive. Maybe she was a better peacemaker than she thought.

"Thank you for your help," Rebekah said to Beckett and the Quarian.
"I appreciate it. And I hope the best for both of you."

The two of them then left to most likely discuss the final details in a quieter setting.

"Keelah...and I thought Quarrians were hard to reason with," the Quarian said to Beckett with a sigh.

"You still are, but we're a close second," Beckett joked. "Sorry for butting in by the way."

"They would've throttled each other if you hadn't. Guess a Quarian's opinion isn't worth much above the Lower Wards."

"Their loss. If anyone knows about health problems, it would be you guys. No offense."

"None taken. The name's Tali, by the way," the Quarian said offering her three-fingered hand for a shake. "Tali'Zorah nar Rayaa."

"Asha Rajapakse Beckett," Beckett said returning the shake.

"You humans and your names," Tali chuckled.

"Speak for yourself. So what brings you to the Presidium?"

"Tourism, shopping, arming for a fight against impossible odds."

"I'm very sure that's true," Beckett chuckled.

"Honest to Keelah. I wanted to check the Alliance weaponry up here. Any useful tips you can give?"

"I've got time. I can just tag along."

"Are you sure hanging out with a Quarian wouldn't be too weird?"

"Only if you're ok being with a big, scary ODST soldier."

"Trust me," Tali chuckled. "The people I hang with are much scarier than you."

They left for a nearby store as Beckett smiled to herself. At least she had some company while she waited for Kyle to be doneâ€¦

* * *

><p>Codex Entry (Human History): James Ackerson

Colonel James Ackerson was a distinguished officer in the UNSC and ONI branches during the Human-Covenant War. On top of superior performance as a field officer, Ackerson served as part of several leadership responsibilities, including as a member of UNSC's Security Committee and HIGHCOM's Special Weapons Development program, that have helped influence Alliance research for decades to come.

_ During the war with the Covenant, Ackerson was emergency reassigned to the Mare Erythraeum region on Mars. It was here that he led the region's army detachment against a Jiralhane led Covenant Loyalist Army. Though his forces fought bravely to slow their progress, Ackerson was captured and interrogated for information on Earth's defenses._

_ Rather than give in to the torture, Ackerson fed the Covenant false information that stalled the Earth campaign on a whole. Though he paid for this deception with his life, his efforts ensured the safe evacuation for thousands of civilian refugees and brought about the death of the Covenant's Minister of Inquisition. Ackerson was given full military honors for his funeral following the end of the war._

_ Additional information on Ackerson's career have been classified by the Office of Naval Intelligence or withheld at the request of his descendants._

* * *

><p>End of Part One! Continue on for another perspective and some more paths being crossed!

12. Crossed and Divergent Paths (Part 2)

** So we've seen what Beckett, Resolme and Engelbrektsson have been up to. Now it's time to take a pit stop for some target practice with La Rosa and Tangilanu. Bonus points if you can name what music video is being referenced in Tangilanu's perspective sectionâ€|**

* * *

><p>...<p>

1523 Hours, March 1st 2683

Office of Naval Intelligence Headquarters

Citadel

Widow System, Serpent Nebula

...

It had been a while since La Rosa visited Top Shots Munitions and Firing Range. The last time he was here, it looked like something from a different century. The walls were rusted, the selection was

minimal and the whole place gave a vibe of a vintage cowboy store. Its firing range was still legendary in the right circles, but not even the biggest fans would call it a booming business.

So it threw him off to see the store as it was now. The walls had been cleaned, the whole place had been tidied, the weapon selection expanded ten-fold and it shone with a modern blue and white hue. There were actually customers in lines too!

With all of this change, however, it was good to see a familiar face approaching him.

"Jared La Rosa, you son of a bitch!" His old Turian friend, Kardus Drugarian, said as he walked towards them from behind the front counter.

La Rosa and Kardus had originally met in the arena combat circuit. Kardus and his team were the reigning hot shots before La Rosa's Grey Wardens beat them in their first championship. Kardus never held a grudge though and the two of them actually started a good friendship once they met outside the ring. The moderators labeled them "friendemies," but La Rosa had nothing but love for his only close alien friend. Even after Kardus retired, La Rosa made a point to visit every time he came to the Citadel.

"That's me alright," La Rosa said giving Kardus a fist bump and looking to the busy store. "Where the hell did all of this come from?"

"Long story," Kardus replied nodding behind him. "Friend of yours?"

La Rosa saw him point to Tangilanu approaching by his side. He hadn't planned on bringing anyone here, but Tangilanu didn't have anything better to do anyway.

"This, mi amigo," He said placing a hand on Tangilanu's shoulder. "Is the 'Tongan Terror' himself, Tu'uta Tangilanu."

"'Tongan Terror?'" Tangilanu asked.

"I may have casually talked up your reputation. Just go with it," La Rosa said before turning back to Kardus. "So, you going to show us around or am I slowing down your work?"

"I'm on break," Kardus said leading the way. "Has the 'Tongan Terror' been here before?"

"I've never even heard of this place," Tangilanu replied still rolling his eyes over his new nickname.

"Most people haven't. It's only one of the most famous underground firing ranges in the galaxy."

"Could have fooled me."

La Rosa agreed looking around. This place had lost a lot of that 'underground' charm with this redesign. Did some corporation buy it out? He knew Kassa Fabrications had made offers in the past, but he didn't see any of their labels.

"You should have seen it before," Kardus said. "It was a shit hole, but it was a good shit hole...if such a thing is possible."

A female customer approached Kardus holding a folded Hammer sniper rifle. "Excuse me, sir."

"How can I help, madam?"

"I'm looking for a rifle my husband can use on weekends. Do you have any recommendations?"

"Hm...I'm not sure a Hammer would be his type. Let me get someone to help. Olmin!"

A Salarian employee taking a nap in the corner under a Fornax magazine woke up startled.

"How about getting off your ass and helping this nice woman find a good 'weekend shooting' rifle?"

Olmin grumbled as he tossed the magazine on the floor and helped the woman.

As he did so, La Rosa continued to check the people in the store. While he was happy business had been picking up, he was surprised no one made a big deal about the fact two champion arena combat fighters were walking in the midst of them. He wanted to point this out to someone, but no opportunities presented themselves.

"All the Salarians who could be working here and I get the lazy one," Kardus mumbled to himself leading the way to a back door. "I don't know if that's irony or an oxymoron."

The two ODST's followed as La Rosa looked back to Olmin trying to pitch a series of rifles while half-asleep.

"When did Olmin start listening to you?" He asked.

"Since I became general manager two months ago," Kardus replied.

"Get out! What happened to Ponchus?"

"Found himself on the wrong end of a C-Sec sting operation. I always knew there was some shady shit, but no one expected weapon smuggling to be the LEAST of his offenses."

"Geez..."

"Yeah, but screw him. This store's not big enough for two hot shot Turians, especially a crooked one like him."

"So how does your boss being arrested lead to all of this?" Tangilanu asked.

"Well," Kardus replied. "Turns out Ponchus had funneled a healthy cache of credits from our store over the last few years. Since it was technically still our money, the investors decided putting it into a 'grand re-opening' would inspire good will with customers."

"The customers who haven't been here before or the veterans?" La Rosa asked.

"Both. The vets had been complaining about the lack of supply and we weren't getting enough new customers to meet their demand. So this way, everyone wins."

La Rosa wasn't entirely confident with that, but he didn't say anything. He kind of liked the old fashioned, disorganized look.

"Your bosses must be excited having a champion arena combat player managing the place," Tangilanu said.

"That hadn't even crossed their minds," Kardus noted. "They just needed someone who wasn't incompetent. And they could say a lot to describe me, but incompetent isn't one of them."

"Why hadn't your previous career crossed their minds?"

"It didn't matter. There's a lot of ex-players and only a few are still 'celebrities,' so putting my face on an advertisement wouldn't change much. Besides, this place doesn't need any more celebrity endorsements. It's got plenty of its own."

La Rosa had felt a little down hearing Kardus shit all over his post-career status, but he picked back up as they entered the firing range. The place had gotten a similar cleaning and re-design, which was surprising since some of those element zero scorch marks had been on these walls for decades. It looked like they had doubled the number of shooting stalls and they were almost all full!

"Wow..." Tangilanu said before whipping out the sarcasm. "Looks like any other shooting range."

"That's what you would think," Kardus replied pointing out to over the range. "But this is what makes the place special."

La Rosa smiled seeing the old scorecube floating proudly high above the range. Everybody who was anybody knew about the scorecube. Ever since Jorak Tyr set the bar for assault rifle speed shooting, people have come from far and wide to dethrone the self-proclaimed 'greatest gunman in the galaxy.'" His category's score still reigned supreme, but that hadn't stopped people from taking titles in numerous other categories. Some of the galaxy's best were represented here, including Gnaligus Tragarian, Taylor Freeman, Elyra Khaas and Turgo 'The Destroyer.' And yes, La Rosa remembered those names in case he ever felt the drive to challenge their record.

"They come for a moldy old scorecube?" Tangilanu said as the cube's displays routinely shifted to showcase another category's top ten.

"That 'moldy old scorecube' is the most famous in the galaxy," Kardus defended. "Anybody who's anybody comes here to put their name on the cube. La Rosa's a testament to that."

"Is he now?"

"You should have seen how many times he did the speed shooting track. Worked his ass off, but he finally made it to eighth."

"I can tell my own life story, Kardus," La Rosa said.

"Sorry. Well, he can see for himself in a moment."

The three of them waited as the cube went through several categories. La Rosa didn't mean to snap at his friend, but it still irked him that no one had recognized him yet. Hell, somebody should have noticed that Tangilanu and him were part of the squad that revived the Master Chief at least. Nope. Nobody even looked twice.

The scorecube eventually reached the sniper speed shooting category and the display slowly revealed the top ten record holders. La Rosa smirked as he was about to prove to Tangilanu how much his hard work paid off...

...until the full list had been revealed and he was nowhere to be seen.

"Um...where's my name?" He asked in disbelief.

"Huh..." Kardus said surprised. "You were here last week. I swear."

La Rosa didn't know what to say. Something inside of him felt...offended. It was like everything he had worked for had been erased. No one cared he was a champion arena combat fighter. No one cared he had rescued the Master Chief. And now no one cared that he was, at least until a week ago, one of the top ten snipers in this range.

Well...they were about to care.

"Is there a stall open?" He asked Kardus.

"I think there's one right there," Kardus replied pointing in front of them. "Why-"

Before he could finish, La Rosa was already there. He quickly scanned the stall to adjust himself on the layout. Even with the re-design, all the features were the same.

"Hey," Tangilanu said as Kardus and him caught up. "What're you doing?"

"The tenth place score is only a few thousand points ahead of mine, right?" He said to the two of them. "I can beat that."

"You want to warm up first?" Kardus asked.

"I've been warming up for the last five months."

He sensed Kardus and Tangilanu look to each other concerned, but he wasn't interested in their concern. Ever since Klensal, he had been feeling a bit...off about his aim. Mavigon proved he could still hit a moving target, but he was usually better than that. Was the ODST making him lazy? Did that Sangheili jackass kicked something loose in his head? He was about to find out.

"Please select your-" the stall's V.I. started before La Rosa programmed the speed sniper course into the terminal. He knew the codes like the back of his hand, so he didn't need anyone to walk him through it.

"Course set," the V.I. said. "Please stand at the firing line"

La Rosa unfolded his sniper rifle from his armor and stepped to the line.

"You guys ready for this?" He said looking to the others.

"Are you sure-?"

"Yes," he cut off Kardus.

"Alright..."

The stall's timer started the ten second countdown as La Rosa eyed the course and the stall scanned his vitals. He knew he was acting irrationally. He remembered seeing the lieutenant get beat by the Chief back when they unfroze him. However, he wasn't trying to butt heads with one of history's greatest soldiers. It was just a routine sniper course.

"Two...one!" The V.I. finished counting.

And like that, La Rosa started firing. Three holograms to the right went down the moment they popped up. Two more to his left got a shot where their eyes should be. Three more down the range went down after that. Target after target popped up only to be gunned down by his precision sniping.

The first round went by in a flash. Kardus and Tangilanu were completely silent as they watched him. He also noticed a few people curiously talking about him from a stall nearby. There we go, he thought to himself. He couldn't pat himself on the back though. The next round was starting and he had seven more to go.

The next couple minutes felt like a blur. He felt like a machine firing at the targets. Soon, moving targets were introduced into the mix. Then targets that could duck behind cover. Then target that could fire back. None of them were a match for him though, as they all got a round through the face or into the heart.

In between his rounds, he heard a small crowd gathering around him. He smiled as he continued shooting. Most of them were likely never seen a veteran practice here. It was always a big deal to have someone who wasn't just an amateur mop the floor with a course. And he wasn't don't yet.

Round eight started and he now faced targets that could take multiple hits unless shot at certain points. This took more focus as he sniped out the smaller targets first and dodged incoming hologram fire before taking down the big boys. The first one got a well placed shot in the heart. The second one didn't go down as quickly, as he missed the instant kill spot by several inches with his first shot. He cursed to himself in Spanish before taking the bastard down.

He then did something he never did when he was in the mode: he checked his current score. He was doing well so far, but he still hadn't cracked the top twelve scores yet. Shit! All of his little errors from came flooding back into his head. The extra seconds he took sniping one target behind a barricade. That one he didn't hit in the face when he could have. Other things that would have lowered his points seemed to rear their ugly heads as he prepared for the final round. He was getting slower. That wouldn't stop him though. As long as he did his damn best in this next round, he could make the top ten.

With that, the last round started with a bang. Several holograms fired at him, forcing him to duck and dodge wildly.

Then he heard a buzzer...which was not a good sign. He quickly looked to the terminal to see a flashing red light on the shoulder of his holographic display model. He got nicked! That ruined his current score multiplier!

He angrily fired back at the holograms, blasting them with head shots. His focus wavered, but he couldn't stop himself. It was either him or the course who gave first and it was going to be the course.

He finally made it to the final two targets. He ducked past their fire and took aim at the nearest one. He could do this. He just needed to-

A shot flew from behind the course and hit his hip. Shit! There was a third target. How could he have missed that?

"Five...four..." He heard the V.I. countdown. He was running out of time!

He spun around and quickly shot the rouge hologram through the neck. He then turned and shot another through the head, earning a multiplier. This was it. If he could hit this one in time, he could make the list.

He spotted the hologram running for cover and took aim. This guy wasn't getting away!

Time slowed to a crawl as a shot erupted from his rifle. The glowing piece of metal zoomed towards its target with exact precision. This was it. This was-

And then the hologram disappeared right before the shot hit it.

"Time's up," the V.I. sounded.

The disappointment from the crowd was inaudible to La Rosa as he quivered with disbelief. How could he have run out of time? There was an extra second on that timer. He was sure of it. Did that third target mess him up that badly?

He set his rifle against the stall's wall and leaned forward to catch his breath. The screen calculated his final score, deducting points from the hits he received and calculating his multipliers. The final result flashed in front of his face like a badge of shame; eleventh

place. He had beaten his previous score, but he was three hundred points short of the tenth place holder. Three hundred points. That's what those two hits cost him...

He could hear the crowd leaving. He didn't want to hear Kardus or Tangilanu praise or apologize to him right now. It wouldn't make his score go up any higher.

Someone did say something though...but it wasn't what he expected.

"Are you...Jared La Rosa?" A woman asked.

His eyebrows raised in surprise. Someone here knew him? How? The stall hadn't displayed his name anywhere.

He turned to see a woman standing between him and his two friends. She was an Alliance soldier, sporting that girly looking Phoenix armor and a kind of ugly hair bun. She wasn't a bad looking woman though.

"Uh...yeah," La Rosa said still surprised.

The woman suddenly became ecstatic and nervous. "Oh my god!" She said containing her excitement. "I knew it. The moment I saw your shooting style though, I knew it was you."

La Rosa looked behind her to see Tangilanu and Kardus just as surprised as him. "Really?" He said.

"Yeah! Who could forget one of the best marksmen the Grey Wardens ever had?"

She was a Grey Wardens fan. Correction...she specifically was a fan of his! He wasn't even sure he still had a fan base after all this time.

"Sorry," the woman apologized. "I didn't mean to interrupt you. I just...I was surprised you practiced here."

La Rosa figured he should reassure her inner fan girl. "Well, of course," he said putting on a more confident face. "It's only the best firing range in the galaxy. Hell, we got another arena combat pro running it behind you."

"I noticed," she said looking to Kardus. "The 'friendemies' under the same roof. I didn't know you guys still hung out."

"I'm occupied more than I would like to be," he said pointing to his ODS logo. "But I wouldn't turn my back on a friend."

"It helps he's one of our best customers too," Kardus added stealthily winking to La Rosa. "Keeps the money flowing in. So, you're an arena combat fan, huh?"

"When I get the chance," she said. "I'm a little out of the loop lately, but my family and I followed your teams when you two played."

"You haven't missed much," Kardus said. "Guys like La Rosa and me are

hard to come by."

La Rosa noticed Tangilanu's confused look and waved a hand to signal him to forget about it. This was something only people in the loop appreciated.

"I'll say," the woman said turning back to La Rosa. "That was an amazing speed run."

"Well..." La Rosa said trying not to look back at the flashing eleven. "I've done better."

"Could have fooled me."

"Thanks," he said as he reached out a hand to her. "I don't think I caught your name by the way."

"Oh right," she said flustered as she shook his hand. "Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams."

"Do your family call you that too?"

She chuckled nervously. "Sorry. I'm just used to introducing myself like that."

"I don't blame you. What brings you to the range today, Gunnery Chief?"

"Target practice. My boss is pushing everyone to get better and I'm feeling rusty with anything other than my assault rifle."

La Rosa looked back to Kardus as she said that. He silently smiled and encouraged him to offer a hand. Even with how much of an ass he was a few minutes ago, Kardus was still watching out for him.

"Well..." He said immediately getting her attention. "I could show you a few sniper tips if you have time."

That was probably a lot more than she expected based on her reaction.

"Really? I mean, that would be cool, but-"

"Yeah totally," Kardus said covertly motioning Tangilanu and him to leave. "It's not everyday he gets to meet a fan. He can fill you in on the tournament circuit too if you want to catch a game later. We'll meet up later, right?" He said to La Rosa.

"Sure," La Rosa said nodding to him. "Give us an hour."

Kardus and Tangilanu left and Ashley joined La Rosa at the stall. "Got a weapon of choice you want to use?" He asked.

"Nothing in particular," she said walking up to him and examined his armor. "So that's what you've been up to."

"Hm?"

"Everyone in my family wondered what happened to you after you

retired. You kind of fell off the grid."

"Yeah, well..." He said remembering that time of his life. "I had a lot to work out."

"Sorry," she said understanding. "It must have been rough."

"The worst," he said as he picked up his rifle again and tried lightening the mood. "Anyway, your boss sounds like a hard ass if he's pushing you like this."

"Well," she said picking up a spare rifle off the stall's gun rack. "When you're boss is the Master Chief, you need all the help you can get."

That made him smile. He still didn't believe there was a God, but something beyond his control was working in his favor today. "Funny you should mention the Chief," he said while programming a practice course...

* * *

><p>"Step up to the firing line, lieutenant," Ackerson said leading Kyle into the ONI headquarters firing range. It was one of the smallest ranges he had ever seen, but it was also one of the most advanced. Everything inside the room was streamlined, from the prestigious appearance of the giant square panels everywhere to minimal amount of features on the main control panel. It was really clean too, like it hadn't been used in months but was still regularly maintained. It was most likely an 'officers only' range, so this was probably a big privilege for him. The black, white and grey color scheme would take some getting used to though. He might go color blind!<p>

He stepped up to the line as scanners mapped out his body and a floating terminal read his vitals. The room hummed as the usual firing range features disappeared into the floor and the square panels re-arranged themselves. Suddenly he was standing in the middle of a three-sixty arena.

"Falana says you're quite the cowboy with a pistol," Ackerson said tapping away at a data pad.

"'Cowboy's' a hyperbole, but I'm pretty good," Kyle said quickly making mental notes on where the holographic displays were.

"Well, let's see if she's right. The range's program has prioritized pistol combat, but we'll vary the weapon testing to make it fair."

A panel next to Kyle opened and a locker full of weapons ascended to the floor. Now this was his kind of test. The long-winded talk about his squad's individual merits, his previous service history, his Alliance regulations knowledge, his leadership responsibilities and all that other stuff was standard fair, if a bit irregular. Shooting things was a lot more fun and useful. If this was where the test ended, it would end with a bang.

The floor hummed with orange lights and the holographic displays shimmered with light. He picked up a Razor pistol from the top of the locker and twirled it with his good hand.

"What's the proper weapons check for a Razor?" Ackerson quizzed.

He quickly and mechanically went through the process of switching on and off the safety, checking the element zero chamber, working the firing chamber and doing the other minor minutia.

"Good," she said. "Two to your right!"

Shit! She already started the test. At least it was keeping him on his toes. He spun to his left to see two holographic dummies materialize. They both went down with headshots.

"Four to your left. Different crippling shot each."

Specific shots now? He could do that. He turned and aimed from his hip after quickly judging where each dummy was. He hit a different one in the shoulder, hip, kneecap and elbow in rapid succession.

"Three in front. Head shots."

That was easy. He turned to the three dummies up ahead, each moving around at different distances to make the shot harder. Not much harder though, as he adjusted his vision to snag the first one in a split second and the other two with the same shot.

"Krogan to your left."

Krogan? He turned to see a tall Krogan hologram materialize. He quickly ran through his combat knowledge to remember what was the most effective tactic. He decided to just fire two shots at the eyes, two more at the legs and rapidly fire at the chest until he broke through the chest armor. There was no right way to kill a krogan. All you could do was just shoot until either you or they stopped moving.

"Four to your right. Assault rifle."

He quickly holstered his pistol, switched to the Avenger rifle and quickly hosed down the four dummies to his left without much effort. This wasn't terrible so far.

"Three to the left and two behind. Shotgun."

He folded the assault rifle and picked up the Hurricane shotgun. Holographic shots whizzed over his head from the left, prompting him to duck before returning fire. They all went down pretty quickly.

"Eight in all directions. Two pistols."

Man, she wanted to see his whole bag of tricks! He unfolded the Razor and picked up a Judgment pistol as the dummies materialized. The scene turned into a Wild West shootout as his arms flailed in different directions taking them all out. He was actually sweating now.

"Four above you."

Above him? He looked up to see several holographic...things, possibly robots, crawling on the ceiling. He wasn't quite sure what they were, but they went down all the same.

"Mgalekgolo behind you. One pistol."

Shit—he twirled and folded one pistol as he faced the holographic Mgalekgolo in a frozen charging motion. Explosives would be preferable here, but she wanted a pistol show. The Mgalekgolo unfroze and swung its right arm, which he rolled under to take potshots at the exposed weak spot. He then quickly stood and unloaded into its back until it vanished. That wouldn't have killed it, but maybe that was the point.

"Assailants behind me!"

Behind her? He turned to see three holographic dummies materialize around her. He hesitated, suddenly being reminded of Beckett being threatened by that one Turian. He snapped out of it and fired a shot into each dummy's eye. Ackerson didn't even flinch they whizzed past her.

"A little slow, but otherwise impressive," she said tapping at the floating terminal. The floor lights dimmed and the rest of the range reset gradually while Kyle returned the weapons to the locker. "Good to know the ODST keep their soldiers well rounded."

"They won't accept anything less," he replied watching the weapons locker descend into the floor.

"Apparently. I can only imagine what you'll teach the guys on my ship."

"I doubt I can do any better than—" He said before realizing what she just said. "Wait—what?"

"Oops," Ackerson deadpanned. "Did I give away the surprise?" Damn, I'm so bad at keeping secrets." She then looked him in the eyes as she continued. "I guess I should be more forthcoming with you, lieutenant."

* * *

><p>Tangilanu had seen some ridiculous things in his day, but he had never seen what he and Kardus were watching right now. Their walk to the Presidium had been interrupted as they stopped to watch some kind of street performance that had drawn a huge crowd. In the center was a group of twenty comprised of humans, Asari, Kig-Yars, a Turian, a Salarian, a Sanheilli and an Unggoy dancing to some synthed-up version of an old song. It wouldn't seem so weird if it wasn't for the fact that they were dressed in human 20th century business suits, or at least their equivalent for the non-humanoid races. There was even a giant box full of costumes somewhere in the back for their other performances.<p>

Tangilanu chuckled watching the group do an admittedly impressive choreography dance while the lyrics played on a speaker:

Don't be shocked by the tone of my voice

Check out my new weapon, weapon of choice

Don't be shocked by the tone of my voice

Check out my new weapon, weapon of choice

_Be careful, we don't know them _

_Be careful, we don't know them _

_Be careful, we don't know them _

You can go with this,

Or you can go with that,

You can go with this,

Or you can go with that,

You can go with this,

Or you can go...

The group then went into a complicated dance routine involving a lot of hip shaking and leg moving over a repeated beat. What some people would do for fame, Tangilanu thought to himself.

After another minute, the song finished and the group was greeted by the thunderous applause of the audience. The group went back to the costume box as the Unggoy greeted the audience.

"Thank you! Thank you!" The Unggoy said. "We are The Elements; the essential building blocks of all things music. We have singers, musicians, mixers and everything needed to resurrect the classics. We're accepting donations while we spread our sound through the extranet to the masses, but I know you need more than that little sample to prove our worth. So let's bring out our lovely and talented lead Asari vocalist Olena Nassali to sing-"

"You had enough?" Tangilanu asked Kardus.

"They've have here for a year," Kardus replied smugly as they left. "They'll be back next week."

The two of them made their way to the elevator leading up to the Presidium. Kardus had felt like doing some exploring while La Rosa and his fan girl enjoyed their time together. Not that Tangilanu had much else to do today. Unplanned Citadel visits were hard to savor because everything he wanted to do took time. Guess he'd have to spend time with La Rosa's friend for now.

"So what's your story, 'Tongan Terror'?" Kardus asked as they waited for the elevator.

"Is that nickname going to stick?"

"Yep. Better get used to it. So how did you join the ODST? I know La Rosa's, but I've never talked to anyone he worked with."

"Not much to say. I had family who fought in various service branches and the corps offered to help pay for my education. Didn't realize that it would be like this."

"Like what?"

"You know," Tangilanu said as they saw the elevator descended. "The ODS life. Hard action when it actually happened, but grueling downtime when it didn't."

"What? You expected to fight a war?"

"No. I just...they say they want the 'best of the best.' So obviously I joined. And what am I doing eighty percent of the time? Training and talking shit when I could be working. It's a waste of talent."

"Everyone has their day," Kardus said as they entered the elevator. "If you keep waiting for something 'exciting' to happen, you won't live long enough to regret it."

They slowly rode the elevator up alone as soothing music played in the background. At least they weren't in a hurry.

"That an old Turian nugget of wisdom?" Tangilanu said continuing on Kardus' thought.

"Nope. That comes straight from the school of Kardus."

"Yeah, cause arena combat was such a life or death situation."

"More than you think."

"How so?"

"It's not the fighting that kills an arena combat player. It's life after the sport."

"Explain."

"Ok. Ever heard of Dyon Shu'um from the Blood Dragons?"

"I don't watch a lot of sports."

"It wouldn't have mattered if he played his cards right. He was one of the greatest snipers the Blood Dragons ever had. A real Sangheili hot shot. He had the charm, the charisma and the talent to stay relevant even outside the sports circles."

"What stopped him?"

"Jared."

"La Rosa?"

"Do you know any other Jareds? Yep, the minute Shu'um stepped out of the spotlight, Jared had one of his best seasons ever. He broke all of Shu'um's sniper records and became that VIP that everyone was chasing. Shu'um tried to keep up his buzz, but without anything to fall back on he just faded out of existence. Last I heard, he was

working at a vendor in Buffet Alley."

"So...your point?"

"Chasing after the spotlight is a fruitless endeavor. It's what I keep trying to tell Jared, but he's..." Kardus said lightly tapping on his skull. "You know."

"Yeah. So why did we stroke his ego letting him hang with his fan?"

"He'll learn someday, but not today. All that stuff with his family dying just slows the process."

Tangilanu nodded. La Rosa didn't talk much about any of that stuff, but he did tell Tangilanu during a drunk night out. It was one of the more unorthodox stories he heard about people joining the ODST, that's for sure.

"Chasing the spotlight's not all bad," Tangilanu said. "A 'thank you' is nice if you can get it."

"'Thank you' and galactic adoration are not the same thing," Kardus said.

"That one also from the school of Kardus?"

"Yep."

Almost on cue, the elevator speakers played a news recap on some big battle that happened on Therum. The Master Chief's name was mentioned no fewer than six times in the story.

"Like that," Kardus said. "The Master Chief would make galactic news if he helped a three legged Varren cross a street."

"Well that would be adorable," Tangilanu joked before continuing. "And yeah, trying to steal the spotlight from him would make anyone cynical."

"What about all the stuff you do?"

"I told you. I don't-"

"Not 'you' you. The general 'you.' Jared told me you guys busted a galactic Red Sand ring. That's a big deal. Did anyone say 'thank you' for that?"

"Do they have to?"

"Don't you want them to? Don't you want to be more than a second fiddle to someone with easy fame?"

Tangilanu then sensed something beneath the conversation's surface. "La Rosa took your spotlight too, didn't he?"

Kardus mandibles twitched a little, but he didn't answer.

"Well," Tangilanu continued. "How come you're not pissed at him?"

"He earned it," Kardus replied. "We fought enough times where I knew what kind of person he was. It helps being 'friendemies.'"

"So what makes him different from the Chief?"

"Jared wasn't unfrozen after a century of sleep and handed the keys to the Citadel. Hell, you guys were the ones who unfroze him. Did the Chief give you a 'thank you' for that?"

"Does he have to?"

"It would be nice to be remembered for something that historic, wouldn't it?"

The elevator came to a stop and the doors opened to the Presidium. The two of them exited while Tangilanu replied.

"Guess it's all about perspective. I mean, you didn't work at Top Shots to stay famous, right?"

"No."

"And how many people do you help on a regular basis?"

"Hm?"

"Well, you're helping a lot of people become better combatants with the shooting range and shop. That's got to be doing some good in the galaxy, even if it's just small."

"Your point?" Kardus asked as they made their way to the area outside the Lower Wards entrance.

"That's a spotlight. Just...you know, a smaller one."

"So are you happy with a small spotlight?"

"Well it would be nice if-"

"So what makes a small spotlight any good?" Kardus said crossing his arms.

Tangilanu wanted to say something in response, but instead he saw something that may make his point better. A short way from them, a Sangheili C-Sec officer was in an argument with a Hanar and a young Asari. It gave Tangilanu an idea.

"Alright," he said smirking back at Kardus. "Follow my lead."

Kardus followed along confused as they approached the group and Tangilanu greeted the C-Sec officer.

"Something wrong, sir?" He asked.

"This is a civilian matter," the C-Sec officer replied breaking from the conversation. "There's no need for ODSI intervention."

"He's here as a civilian," Kardus replied still seeing where Tangilanu was going with this. "He's well within his right to

ask."

"What seems to be the problem?" Tangilanu asked.

"This one believes it has the right to preach freely in this area," the Hanar defended itself in that weird third person talk they used.

"Your presence is creating a public disturbance," the officer said to the Hanar.

"This one is unsure why the other would not wish the word of the Enkindlers to be spread. The other allows preaching of the Forerunners."

"Those people had permission to do so!"

"Maybe we shouldn't get caught up in this," Kardus whispered to Tangilanu, who brushed his concern aside.

"Ok, one second," Tangilanu said raising his hands to quiet the group. "Can someone please explain the situation?"

"My apologies," the Asari said relieved for some assistance. "It's been a touchy situation." She pointed to the Hanar as she continued. "The Hanar wishes to proselyte in this area, but the officer objects to it."

"The Hanar refuses to listen to reason," the officer interjected. "We're not opposed to religious discussion on the Citadel, but he must purchase an Evangelical Permit to do so and stay within the registered preaching areas."

Great...Tangilanu got them entangled in a religious freedom problem. It's not that he had anything against religion. Hell, he and half his family were Methodists. He just knew better than to argue between secular and religious groups. Still, he wanted to prove a point, so he had to stick to his guns here.

"So if the Hanar got a permit, then there's no problem right?" He asked.

"This one believes the truth of the Enkindlers is universal," the Hanar added. "Exacting payment as a means of imposing limits upon the truth is an abrogation of this one's religious freedoms. It is not preaching to state the truth of the Enkindlers, thus no permit should be necessary."

"So we should just ignore the laws just because one person feels entitled?" The officer rebuffed. "Your beliefs are no better than anyone else who would have to submit for a permit. Letting one zealot in for free will open a floodgate for millions more. How would that help your truth?"

"Please," the Asari said. "There has to be a way we can resolve this amicably."

"I'm beholden to the law, ma'am," the officer said. "If the Hanar sticks to the registered zones, there's no issue."

"And this one is beholden to its principles," the Hanar also said. "This one feels the truth should be available throughout the Citadel."

Tangilanu thought the situation over carefully before making a time-out gesture with his hands. "Give us just a minute," he said as he brought Kardus and the Asari off to the side to discuss things.

"I'm sorry you had to be dragged into this," the Asari apologized. "I had hoped for a swifter resolution."

"I'm sorry too," Kardus said sarcastically.

"Does the Hanar have any money to pay for the permit?" Tangilanu asked the Asari.

"Unfortunately no," the Asari said. "It would make things easier if he had just gotten one."

"So why don't we just tell him to leave?" Kardus asked. "He's just going to be a nuisance otherwise."

"He deserves a chance to preach," the Asari defended.

"Are you an Enkindler believer?"

"No, but I've seen people preach here without a permit. They just say they're having 'a discussion' amongst friends about the Forerunners and the officer lets it continue. Turning away the only Enkindler preacher who has tried getting a soapbox would bode ill with his community."

"And giving him a pass could cause an incident with the other religious communities."

Tangilanu continued to think as the other two discussed. There were some valid points being made here. He tried to think back to his days back in Tonga with his family. They had their fair share of arguments before, sometimes over much worse things. His grandmother had always been a peacekeeper though and she knew exactly what had to be said to calm everyone down. That way, everyone left with a good feeling inside. Could he do that himself? He searched his mind for conversations his grandmother had with his cousins, trying to think of what she had said and what tactics she used. It would be a gamble, but maybe it could work.

Taking a deep breath, he walked back to the Hanar and the Sangheili.

"Hey, wait," Kardus said unable to stop him.

Tangilanu stood between the two arguing people and raised a hand to quiet them down. He then looked to the Hanar. "Sir, can I ask a question?"

"This one would be happy to answer any inquires about the Enkindlers," the Hanar replied.

"Do you feel the Enkindlers expect their followers to follow a

certain model of character?"

"But of course. The Enkindlers gave the Hanar language and the universe the mass relays. This one only wishes to preach of the peace and order their knowledge brings to all life."

"And what kind of peace and order is being followed if you just barge in expecting people to obey your wishes? Would the Enkindlers be supportive of that?"

"The Enkindlers would want their message to be heard."

"But not without upholding the law. How much good would spreading a message be when one becomes their own worse roadblock?"

"The human speaks the truth, Hanar," the officer said.

"The law should be willing to aid in these situations too, though."

"What?"

"If religious tolerance is to be upheld, how can you deny him the opportunity to even try?"

"He just needs a permit and he can preach in the designated zones. I've explained that a million times."

"My friend here," Tangilanu said pointing to the Asari, "Has seen people holding religious discussions in this area without any restriction to where or how they can speak. By definition, that would be considered evangelical and proselyting by nature."

"If you want to get technical-"

"I do. The law upholds the right of religious freedom, but inversely segregates religious discussion to certain locations or turns a blind eye when convenient. Does that seem fair to the expression of faith?"

"It's to uphold the peace of the community."

"And who's to say it would cause problems? Perhaps the Hanar can open up friendly discourse with the other preachers. We can't just assume that all the religious groups on the Citadel will be hostile."

The two arguing parties were silent now as Tangilanu continued.

"Maybe we can try something here. My other friend and I can provide payment for an Evangelical Permit that the Hanar can use."

"What now?" Kardus said surprised.

"Just go with it," Tangilanu said before continuing. "In exchange, you can let the Hanar do a trial period here on the Presidium. If he causes any problems or provokes the community, he can be legally moved to a designated area. If nothing happens, you might open a chance for other communities to share proselyting time peacefully. This way, no group is shown favoritism and the cultural diversity the Presidium strives for is maintained. I'm sure your bosses would be grateful that you helped to keep the peace here."

The two parties thought this over for a minute before the officer turned to the Hanar. "If you get your permit, I can let you use this spot for two days under my supervision. If no one complains and you wish to apply for additional days, you'll have to come through the office and deal with us there. Is that clear?"

"This one does not wish to be a problem," the Hanar replied in agreement. "This one thanks you for the opportunity to share the Enkindlers' message."

"Sure, whatever," the officer said turning to Tangilanu. "So, you'll cover the permit charge?"

Tangilanu turned to Kardus and motioned for him to pay for part of the permit. Kardus shook his head at first, but at Tangilanu's insistence he relented and handed over the amount needed.

"Here," the Asari said giving Kardus some credits. "It's not much, but it should help."

Kardus gave Tangilanu his portion, who added his own and gave it to the Hanar. "This should be enough."

"This one thanks you for your assistance," the Hanar said to Tangilanu before turning to the officer. "And this one will be respectful to the other citizens in its preaching."

"See to it you do," the officer said.

As the Hanar floated away hopefully to buy that permit, the officer shook his head and looked to Tangilanu. "That guy was making my morning hell," he said.

"I bet. Hopefully your superiors are ok with this."

"It'll take a little effort, but we'll see what happens. God knows the Mormons have been trying their hardest to preach here, so maybe this will keep them quiet too. Thanks for the help anyway," he said before turning to the Asari. "And my apologies ma'am for taking up so much of your time."

"It's fine," the Asari reassured. "You were doing your job."

"Glad someone understands that. Enjoy your time on the Citadel," the officer said before leaving.

"Thank you," the Asari said to Tangilanu. "I really had no idea how to handle this. Citadel evangelical laws aren't my strong suit."

"I don't know a thing about them either," Tangilanu admitted. "I was just glad you mentioned the religious discussions thing, Miss..."

"T'soni. Liara T'soni."

"Miss T'Soni. I wouldn't have gotten anywhere without that."

"I'm glad we could work together on that," Liara said as she looked to Kardus. "And if I can help repay for the two of you..."

"It's fine," Kardus said shaking his head. "It's our good deed for the day."

"Thank you. I'm sure your kindness will be reciprocated," Liara said before leaving.

Tangilanu crossed his arms and looked to Kardus smugly. He mock held out a hand as if feeling for sunlight before whistling. "I don't know about you, but this little spotlight feels pretty good."

Kardus rolled his eyes. "I'll never understand people like you and Jared," he joked. "You really are a 'Tongan Terror.'"

Tangilanu smiled as he followed Kardus to some new place. It was a long way to make a point, but maybe Kardus could add this to his little philosophy book. At least La Rosa would get a kick from this story when they met back up on the Tokyo...

* * *

><p>Codex Entry (Planets and Locations): Gagarin Station

Named after the first human to orbit a planet, Gagarin Station was the first collaborative construct between the Alliance and the Sangheili Empire following the Human-Covenant War. Often nicknamed 'The Grunt Hole' for the Unggoy workers who built it, the station was meant to be a symbol of galactic cooperation and expansion in a post-war era.

_ Gagarin Station served for a time as the Biotic Acclimation and Temperance Training program central hub. Young biotics were housed in the station and taught to develop their skills for superior reintegration into the galactic community. However, following rumors of suspicious activities and incident reports, the program's sponsor, Conatix Industries, shut down the program. The specifics for these rumors are still unknown._

_ Gagarin Station played a pivotal role in mass effect technology research, deep space telemetry exploration and high profile experiments to risky for public exposure. It also served as a resting place for several high profile decommissioned AI's, who prior to death also aided in research for safer VI programs currently in use in the Alliance military._

_ Today, the station houses a regular population of 11,000 people, including civilian, military and scientific personnel. Scientific collaborations with alien governments held on the station continue to produce new technology to further the galactic community.
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* * *

><p>Two down, one more to go. One can only wonder what Danielle has in store in this next partâ€|

We** are on the victory lap of this mega section. Only two more stops with Kyle and a return visit to see how Resolme and Engelbrektsson resolve their arcâ€|**

* * *

><p>...<p>

1603 Hours, March 1st 2683

Office of Naval Intelligence Headquarters

Citadel

Widow System, Serpent Nebula

...

Kyle slumped forward in his chair back in the Major's office mulling over her proposition. Soâ€|it was a recruitment test all along. He should have seen it coming with all the pointed questions, specific accounting and weapons testing. Why him though? ONI marine training to years to even become qualified for.

"Lieutenant?" Ackerson asked.

He refocused on the conversation he had tuned out of to see her behind her desk.

"I said, 'Do you understand'?" She repeated.

"â€|I think so?" He fumbled.

"You haven't heard a word I said, have you?"

He shook his head

"Well," she said condescendingly. "Rather than repeat something you won't listen to, let's hear what worries are taking priority in your mind."

He didn't like being talked down to, but he should use the opportunity to air his grievances. "â€|why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you consider me?"

"To be honest, I didn't," she admitted. "At least not until a month ago. I was originally just considering himâ€|"

She then pulled up a vid from her desk terminal displaying a HUD feed of two soldiers fighting in a combat arena. The feed froze right on an extreme close-up of La Rosa's face!

"Captain Falana and some of my men came in contact with your sniper back at New Mombasa," she continued. "I believe Falana when she claims she went easy on him, but he still beat some of my strongest single handed. I wanted to know what kind of background could lead to that, which led to me searching his files and, incidentally,

searching yours."

So he had La Rosa to thank for this meeting. He'd have to give him a 'thank you' kick later.

"As I said before, you're an intriguing soldier. ONI always keeps an eye on the other branches to see what they can offer for us. The ODS'T have always been an anomaly though. All volunteer recruitment, regular rotation amongst Alliance vessels, wide spread training in all combat situations, etc. It's one of the most balanced and powerful military divisions in the galaxy and that's not an exaggeration."

"So is it ME that's intriguing or just ODS'T in general?" Kyle asked. "Ralston's higher ranked and an ODS'T lifer too."

"Ralston's a good leader, but we need him on the _Tokyo_ more than on a combat field," she replied. "And he wouldn't be that much higher ranked if you hadn't turned down those promotions. Why is that by the way?"

He didn't have an answer to give so he gave none.

"I'm going to make a bold and most likely correct assumption here," she continued as she stood and walked to her office window. "You're a dedicated soldier. Not hard to surmise. You give your best performance in any task, even when you lack the skills to achieve it. Whether this is rooted in familiar or religious upbringing is negligible, since that can be said of many inferior soldiers. So there's something else that drives you that's far more elusive."

Uncomfortable memories of his last psychoanalyst visit flashed in Kyle's mind, causing him to grip his hands under his desk.

"I heard what you went through on Shanxi. I have family and friends who fought there too. It's an unfortunate part of our history and the scars that haven't fully healed. I wouldn't blame the people I know for not fully forgiving the Turians."

"Oh?" He asked curiously.

"Sure. Think of all the bitter feelings people felt when they realized all of our 'retake Shanxi' propaganda ended in a stalemate. We got our planet back but we lost our Slip-space, Smart A.I.'s and a lot of good soldiers. To the people I knew, it was almost as bad as if the Turians actually beat us."

Kyle's hands loosened as she talked, curious to hear where this was going.

"I can't bring peace to my friends. They knew too many friends whose blood still stain Shanxi's soil. They encountered too many A.I.'s 'forcibly retired' to keep the peace. They saw too much that can't be unseen. All of that for an embassy on the Citadel. It's not the freedom you lost your hand for, is it?"

"...no," he mumbled.

"That's why you haven't replaced it, isn't it? You don't want to

forget. You don't want to feel like your losses meant nothing in the grand scheme of things?"

He didn't answer.

"Good. ONI doesn't want you to forget."

"Why does ONI care about what I won't forget?" He said not conceding to her analysis.

"People like you have helped ONI for years. It's the way we've handled things on Earth before and after the Human-Covenant War."

"How so?"

"There's a few examples," she said tapping at her omni-tool. "Remember when the Goliath PMC tried invading Nigeriar?"

"I remember hearing their boss was killed in a UNSC raid."

"Exactly," she said pulling up a vid through her desk terminal. "Sergei Polonska's death only happened through a lot of dedicated work from Nigerian ONI operatives embedded in Goliath. Like you, they had something to prove. In this case, they had figured that the skirmishes reported in the cities of Zaria and Ibadan weren't isolated post-war incidents. They were the first step in a coup to take control of Africa. If it wasn't for those operatives' dedication, we couldn't have intervened."

The vid showed an old HUD feed of UNSC and ONI marines storming Polonsk's hideout, systematically taking out his men before putting a bullet in his head. He knew about this event from old news vids, but he had never seen this one before. The ONI pyramid logo at the bottom corner was probably why. The vid then froze on the face of one ONI marine taking off his helmet.

"Otto Suliamon," she continued. "A Human-Covenant War veteran, a dedicated family man and one of ONI's most valued recruits. Without his work, Africa would be a very different place."

It was an interesting storyâ€¦to someone else. Kyle shrugged mentally and leaned back in his chair.

"You're right," Ackerson said sensing his disinterest. "Who is he to you? It's not one of our most glamorous victories and this vid will be declassified in a matter of days." She turned to face out the window. "Let's say there's a lot more interesting classified stories concerning the entirety of the Alliance's restructuring period. Aiding the establishment of new nation-states, opening economic expansion in the lesser-developed regions, negotiating treaties with former Covenant races. Anything that has preserved human interest in the last century has had at least one ONI operative central to its success."

"Next you'll take credit for discovering element zero," Kyle joked. The lack of a response immediately caught his attention though.

"Everything that has happened upon meeting the Council races has been cut-and-paste work. Impressing the Turians with our military might and the Salarians with our science was easy. The Asari were trickier, with their whole 'holier than thou because we're biotics' shit, but we've found ways around that too."

"What about the Krogans? Quarians? Elcor?"

"When was the last time you heard of an Elcor doing something significant to the galaxy?" She said. "I'm not being xenophobic saying that. It's just a fact. Elcor, Hanar, Volus and the other 'minor' races are easy to rally, but not priorities. Krogans are going to take longer to win over since they can't even talk to each other politely. And Quarians? Well, the whole 'Geth attacking Alliance space' issue doesn't help, but we're on good terms with them at the moment."

"You've all thought this through very carefully huh?"

"Only because we have people like you to help," she said before turning back to face him. "What I'm trying to say with these tangents is that everyone working for ONI wants what you want: to prove that humanity is stronger."

"How so?"

"Well it's a classic rule: how do you defeat your enemies?"

"A lot of ammunition and a big ass bomb."

"That's a start, but it doesn't last. Standing ground against the Turians is one thing, but the best way is to either ridicule them or make them your friends."

That ruffled Kyle's feathers thinking that. "They're not my friends."

"They don't know that," she said. "And I'm not asking you to be friends. As far as they're concerned, all of these joint projects and collaborations been working towards furthering the peace. In reality, they're playing into our goals. All it takes to cement the deal is a spot on the Council. Once we have a voice, they'll eat out of our hands. They'll grovel to get Slipspace reinstated. They'll beg for A.I.'s to be brought back into mass production. They'll concede to whatever we ask because we're their 'friends,' not realizing until it's too late that they never should have poked a bear like humanity. And that, in the end, is how you defeat your enemy."

Admittedly, the thought of Turians groveling at Kyle's feet was an amusing one. He'd still prefer shooting them, but he could see what Ackerson was aiming for.

"I thought you'd like the sound of that," she said. He realized that he had been smiling the entire time she had been talking.

"I guess I do," he replied.

"All of those friends of mine did too. And that's why we want you and your squad to join my crew. Seeing you in action made me realize your talents are wasted serving on normal ships. Iâ€" "

"Hold on," Kyle interrupted. Something he had overlooked suddenly became apparent. "How long ago did you transfer us to your ship?"

This caught Ackerson off guard for a moment. It caught him off guard too, since he had no idea where that thought came from. He just felt it had to be asked.

"Very perceptive," she said sitting back at her desk. "The moment you first stepped in my office."

"â€¦figures."

"I know when I want something."

"So what are the catches?"

"Mostly positive. You will be immediately promoted to 1st lieutenant, no questions asked. A pay raise respective to your positionâ€¦"

"â€¦for my squad too?"

"They're coming with you, so yes," she said not wishing to be interrupted further. "You will also gain access to experimental ONI hardware still awaiting the standard ODST trial testing."

"And the non-disclosure part of it all?"

"Not terribly tragic, but you already knew that came with the deal," she said. "All of your actions within ONI are classified to any outside of my ship, including cause of death should it occur."

"Sounds fairâ€¦"

"There's also one more personal catch I want to emphasize," she said taking a more serious tone. "When you're on my ship, you respect the chain of command. Whether it's my decision or theirs, it's absolute. Understood?"

Ackerson's stern glare burned in Kyle's brain. Was it a general warning or just directed to him? Either way, he played it safe.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Glad we came to an understanding," she said relaxing. "Last thing we need is to not trust each otherâ€¦"

* * *

><p>Resolme fidgeted as he waited with Engelbrektsson and Kaidan in the Lower Wards markets. He watched all of the various people going about their business buying, selling and trading whatever they had. Just life going on like it should. No reason for them to be suspicious of the Alliance marine and two ODST soldiers nonchalantly hanging out amongst them, right?<p>

Well they should be, or at least if they knew what the three of them were here for. It felt like a whole day had been flashing in front of Resolme's eyes after they left Chora's Den. Their trip to C-Sec had been a little unpleasant, mostly because of that undercover officer Chellick they had bumped into while leaving the Den. The Turian chewed him out in particular for nearly blowing Jenna's cover along with his, though he quickly forgot about it once Kaidan asked about the situation.

Apparently getting Jenna out of C-Sec was a lot harder than just asking. On top of whatever work she was doing, there was a lot of 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' stuff involved. Kaidan and Engelbrektsson tried talking their way around getting caught up in it, but they didn't have enough combined charm to change Chellick's mind. So they were offered a deal.

Jenna was gathering intel on an illegal arms producer on the Citadel and C-Sec almost had enough evidence to track him down. All they needed was to get their hands on his product. It was up to the three of them to meet with the producer's seller, Skath, in the Lower Ward and buy some of his stuff for Chellick. Sounded simpleâ€¦

â€¦except that Resolme was close to losing his cool. He just wanted to relax on the Citadel and Engelbrektsson had gotten them swept up in some crazy plot. He didn't exactly offer resistance to volunteering, but it's not like he could say no. He would be a prick for both not helping Jenna get out of a dangerous situation and for knowing illegal operations were going on under his nose.

He sighed as he thought about what his brother Noah would do. That guy wasn't afraid of anything. He could look a Jiralhanae in the eye and not flinch. Maybe that's why everyone was more excited when he joined the ODST. He was everything a recruit should be. Resolme was just a punk who wanted to follow in his brother's footsteps.

He kicked himself mentally trying to remember Captain Ralston's words from the other day. He could do this. He needed to be calm. Sure, he messed up with the Broadfin turrets and nearly ruining a C-Sec operation, but he could do this.

Engelbrektsson and Kaidan didn't seem to be bothered at all with their situation. Hell, they didn't even look worried about anything chatting the way they did.

"What was that one kid in the group?" Engelbrektsson asked Kaidan continuing some conversation they were having. "The ginger Scottish kid?"

"Garrett," Kaidan said chuckling. "Yeah, I remember him. He always told those stories about his ancestors fighting the English."

"Oh, that's the guy we used to call 'Braveheart!'" Engelbrektsson said realizing. "I totally forgot his real name."

"Hopefully you don't remember the stuff you used to call me."

"I do. It's just not as cool saying it as an adult."

"Thanks."

"No worries, 'Kaidy,'" she teased to his annoyance. "Sorry, couldn't resist. Hey, you heard from Rahna recently?"

Kaidan frowned. "Noâ€¦I haven't."

"That's a shame. You guys used to be inseparable. I'd figure she'd call you afterâ€¦" She said dancing around something big.

"Yeahâ€¦well, she didn't," Kaidan replied.

They sat in uncomfortable silence while Resolme watched a Kig-Yar argue with a Salarian about something. He didn't want to eavesdrop but they were standing right next to him so it was hard not to.

"No one blames you, you know?" She asked Kaidan breaking the silence.

"That doesn't make it right," he replied.

"Why not? That bastard Vyrnnus had it coming when he broke Rahna's arm."

Resolme continued pretending not to listen, though that bit of information caught his ear.

"I could've stopped," Kaidan continued. "I already knocked him down. I could have just left it there and no one would have died."

"That asshole slashed a knife at your ribs!" Engelbrektsson emphatically responded. "No, that wasn't enough."

"You didn't see everyone's faces after he died. All of you staring at me like I started the next Contact War. Rahna wouldn't even let me apologizeâ€¦"

Engelbrektsson paused before replying. "You did make a messâ€¦" she replied. "I didn't know what to think when it happened. Like, should I have been happy or afraid that he was dead? After all these years though, you know what I think?"

"What?"

"That you should have t-bagged him too."

"Maybe so," Kaidan said trying to resist a chuckle.

At that moment, Resolme spotted the targets they were waiting for. Across the market, a large Jiralhanae dressed in blue merc armor pushed through the crowds with a Krogan with a big metal case and two Turians keeping close distance behind him. He recognized Skath from the surveillance vids Chellick showed them. The time for awkward conversation was over. Now for the scary partâ€¦

"They're here," he said to the other two.

"Alright," Kaidan said as they started walking. "Everyone know the drill?"

"Do some chit chat, get the goods, give it to Chellick,"

Engelbrektsson said replied. "Easy."

"And let me do the talking," Kaidan emphasized.

"Cool. I can look tough."

Resolme took a deep breath as the two groups got closer to their 'discreet meeting place' in the corner. He should just follow Engelbrektsson's lead and look tough. That was easier said than done though.

The groups eventually got close enough to where Skath lifted his hand to stop them.

"That's close enough, army," Skath growled stopping both groups. Resolme could feel the Jiralhanae sizing them up with those beady, angry eyes. "Since when did they start sending ODS to do these deals?"

"It's a big trade," Kaidan quickly but calmly thought up. "You need muscle in case things go south."

"They don't scare me," Skath replied staring down Engelbrektsson. Resolme did his best to keep his nerves up and avoid direct eye contact. Skath snapped his big fingers at Kaidan. "You got my payment?"

"You got the mods?" Kaidan replied.

"Jax," Skath said to the Krogan carrying the case. "Show them the goods."

The Krogan muttered to himself as he set the case down and opened it. True to their word, they had a huge assortment of weapon mods on display. There were enhanced scopes, element zero upgrades and other mods that were untested and cheaply manufactured. He knew Tangilanu wouldn't approve.

"You got a problem with my merchandise?" Skath said glaring at him.

Resolme jumped out of his thoughts seeing everyone look at him. Crap! He thought he didn't have an expression on. Act natural. Act tough. Do something!

"Uhâ€¦" he stammered. "It's pretty impressive. I've justâ€¦never seenâ€¦those mods."

Skath stared him down, trying to get a read on him. Shitâ€¦this wasn't going well. He put on a more deadpan face trying to keep his cool.

"Look," Kaidan said. "We got your money. You can justâ€¦"

"Not so fast," Skath said stopping him and point to Resolme. "You. Get over here."

Resolme resisted looking at Kaidan and Engelbrektsson as r his heart beat loudly. He couldn't refuse this guy, but he didn't know how this would turn out. He sighed and walked slow steps towards Skath. He

kept repeating to himself 'what would Noah do?' hoping it would help for some reason.

He stopped right in front of Skath as the Jiralhanae picked up a mod from the case. "Think you know good mods, do you?"

Resolme saw the Turians and that Jax guy with their hands resting near their pistols. He figured what the problem was. He was blowing his own cover again and this guy wanted to prove it. He kept repeating the Noah thing as if it would do something.

Skath held up a weird looking muzzle mod into Resolme's face. "Tell me what kind of mod this is."

Crap! Resolme scanned the thing over and quickly searched his memory for anything Tangilanu or the other guys talked about that could help. Let's see—it was a sniper mod but it wasn't one of the name brands. It had several modifiers awkwardly smashed alongside it, but none of them were visibly recognizable. He had to wing something.

"Uh—" He started weakly. "It's been a while since I saw one of these—" He sensed that Kaidan and Engelbrektsson preparing for a fight behind him. He took a wild guess. "But I believe that's a .400CC-Series 4 Sniper Suppressant—with a...Polonium charge to coat the metal slugs and...a Particle Beam Rifle aiming assist?"

The air went stale save for the Skath's hot breath wafting at Resolme's face as he waited for a response.

"—even better," Skath replied with a smirk. "Series 5. Just produced last week. Guaranteed to take a Mgalekgolo down in no more than two shots. Tell me you haven't seen a better mod than that."

Resolme sighed within himself as he saw Jax and the Turians lower their weapons. "Uh—no," he said taking a step back. "Can't say I have. That's some powerful hardware you got there."

"Damn straight it is!" Skath said pointing at his face. "They're the best in the market and don't you forget it. Now hand over my credits."

Resolme quickly looked back to Kaidan and Engelbrektsson, who motioned him to stop wasting time and finish the transaction. They looked relieved that he didn't get shot in the face.

"Alright," Resolme said with some regained confidence as he exchanged the credits offered by Chellick. "Here's the money."

"Excellent," Skath chuckled as he put the mod back in the case and kicked it towards Kaidan. "We're done here."

Jax and the Turians were about to leave when Skath decided to give one last piece of advice to Resolme. "I hear any shit about my product from anyone," He said taunting. "I'm going to skin that terrible poker face off and mount it on my wall. Keep your stupid shit to yourself." He then led his group out of the market place, content with his bluff.

Resolme exhaled loudly once Skath was out of earshot and rested his hands on his knees. He had been in the middle of two firefights in the last two days, yet that was one of the scariest things he had done to date.

"Well at least you didn't blow your cover," Kaidan said to him clearly as relieved. "How did you know that mod info?"

"I didn't," Resolme confessed. "I went with a hunch."

"Well good guess work, Sherlock," Engelbrektsson added as she picked up the case. "Now we can unite this family of perfect strangers we just met and feel good about ourselves. Shall we go?"

Resolme waved them off as he caught his breath. "I'd rather do something not crazy right now. Go on ahead."

"You sure?" Kaidan asked.

"Yeah, it's fine. You don't want me being a third wheel."

"alright. See you on the ship." Engelbrektsson said as he heard them leave. Well, at least she was having a good time catching up with a friend.

Resolme had to pat himself on the back a little bit. He stood toe to toe with a Jiralhanae thug and talked his way out of a bloodbath. Granted, having two powerful biotics like Engelbrektsson and Kaidan backing him up helped, but it looked like he didn't need them. Noah would have loved this story

He stood up and breathed deeply. So now that he wasn't tied into this crazy situation, what would he do next?

In the back of the market, he swore he saw a young Sangheili suspiciously trying to act nonchalant as he edged closer to a Keeper. He had some kind of scanning device in his hand that Resolme had never seen before. Should he?

Nope! He quickly turned the other direction and walked away. Let that be some other person's problem, he thought to himself. He had enough surprises for today.

* * *

><"ONI? Seriously, Kyle?"<

Kyle walked through the lower wards as he spoke to Beckett through his comm. piece. He had heard about her run-in with the Quarian and all the girly stuff they did together before he dropped that bomb. He had planned to tell everyone once they met up later, but he thought she should know first.

"Yup" he replied. "We've been shanghaied by the 'spook.'"

"Did you consider any of our opinions before making this choice?"

"It was pretty much made for me, so no." He heard her sigh as he

rounded a corner to an open market area with a bunch of food outlets. Being stuck in that ONI office had worked up an appetite, but he couldn't decide on one thing to eat. So why not try a little of everything? They didn't call it 'Buffet Alley' for nothing.

"Well at least you got promoted. I thought you had an allergic reaction to those."

"Guess ONI had the right meds for that," he said as he saw a group of C-Sec officers run off to address something urgent. "There might be one for you too if they're still feeling generous. You have my recommendation."

"I'm flattered," she teased. "How soon do they want us on the _Mare Erythraeum?_"

"First thing in the morning, but we have to clean our lockers and brush up on our new 'do not touch' rules tonight," he said taking a free sample of what he hoped was chicken from a nearby vendor. The Sangheili behind the counter mumbled something as he went to another customer.

"I hear chewing," Beckett said.

"You are correct, ma'am," Kyle said swallowing his mouthful. "You had anything to eat yet?"

"Nope. You asking me on a date?"

"Well if I intimidate you that much, bring La Rosa and Engelbrektsson. That'll suck all the fun right out," he joked. Out of the corner of his eye, he swore he saw a female Quarian do a double take at him. He wasn't sure if he recognized her, since all Quarrians looked the same in their outfits. He decided to focus back on the conversation. "But seriously, we should discuss this ONI stuff before we break the news."

"Alright. Send me your location and I'll be there ASAP."

"Well it's less a location and more a food circus."

"'Buffet Alley' again?"

"The 'spook' classified my taste buds, so I need to rediscover what I like," he joked looking at a menu up ahead.

"I'm sure you do," Beckett replied chuckling. "See you soon."

The comm. went silent while Kyle continued scanning for options. The Alley wasn't exactly known for being a ritzy like that snooty sushi place in the Presidium. Most of the people here were lower class folk just getting by. Families strolled in groups hoping to find a bargain meal. Teenagers hung out with dates judging which free samples were the best. Shady types huddled around their shady carryout trays to discuss their shady business. All of this noise, combined with the calls from the various vendors, made this place a mess. Still, if you needed a place to get lost in for a few hours, you could do a lot worse.

He did feel like getting lost after all that stuff with Ackerson. Her words buzzed in his head about that whole 'ONI's secretly responsible for everything' stuff. Had it been anyone else, he would have called them crazy. This woman knew what she was talking about though and he didn't doubt that ONI had their hands in a lot of people's pockets. He had seen it first hand the other day and now he was going to be part of it. What was the price for getting them a seat on the Council?

Well, being chummy with Turians for one thing. Maybe it was good the Turians were interested in their military power, but he still remembered them shooting, trampling, burning and brutalizing the people he cared for like it was yesterday. No amount of 'friendly dominance' could erase that. Guess he would have to practice his 'friendly face' or just let Ackerson talk them to death.

A stall nearby with the title 'Tatopoulos' Greek Delicatessen then caught his attention, reminding him that he was still very hungry. He hoped Asha had an appetite for pita and humus.

Before he could approach the counter though, he felt a long finger tap his shoulder.

"Excuse me," a filtered voice said.

He turned to see the female Quarian he spotted earlier. The bright green and purple environmental suit she wore couldn't mask her nervous body language as she tried to speak with him. Why she wanted to was a mystery.

"Are you Kyle Nolan?" She asked.

"Yeah," he said surprised she knew his name.

"Sorry, I knew this would be awkward, but I didn't think I would get another chance," she said nervously rubbing one of her three fingered hands on the other. "You won't remember me anyway."

He tried to remember where he might have met her. The voice was mildly familiar, but again it seemed like all Quarians looked and talked the same.

"My name is Khari'sha nar Idenna," she continued. "A while ago, I got into a lot of trouble. I was on my pilgrimage for too long trying to bring a great gift for my fleet, but it ended up being a ten thousand credit trap. It took a long time to pay the debt off, but one of my creditors thought I hadn't paid enough."

Something sparked in Kyle's memory. He decided to let her continue before jumping to a conclusion.

"Sorry I shouldn't waste your time," the Quarian apologized looking to leave.

"No, it's fine," he reassured. "Keep going."

"Ok. Well, this man sent thugs to shake me down for credits even though I had already paid him. They threatened to take my mask off if I didn't give everything I had."

Now he knew for sure where they had met.

"and then you came to my rescue."

That was it. It had happened so many months ago that he had put it in the back of his mind, mostly out of fear someone might connect him to beating those Turian thugs. Apparently, it meant a lot more to her.

"I didn't tell C-Sec anything about you," she continued. "I said my mask was fogged so I couldn't see your face. Truth was I never forgot about you. Once I matched your face to an extranet search I stayed on the Citadel a while longer. It hasn't been easy and I'm just scraping by, but I just"

She paused and looked to her feet nervously. He let her collect her thoughts as he anticipated what she wanted to say.

Instead, she surprised him by wrapping her arms around his waist in a tight hug.

"Thank you," she said releasing the embrace. "I'm sorry. That probably stepped over a line, but I just you don't know what that meant to me." She turned to walk away. "I'll let you eat now."

Kyle stood there dumbfounded. It was rare to get a 'thank you' for something he did, let alone from an alien. He hadn't even considered saving her that day. He just wanted to beat up those Turians. Yet this actually felt more rewarding.

"Wait," he said before she could leave. She turned back sharply, not knowing what to expect. "I uh well, are you hungry?" He hadn't really thought this through, but he figured he should do something nice to not leave things awkward.

"yes, but I wouldn't want to inconvenience you," she said surprised.

"It's fine," he reassured. "I'm sure someone here serves um, Quarian food somewhere." He realized he wasn't exactly sure what Quarrians ate other than nutrient dextro paste.

That made her chuckle as she pointed down the Alley. "Yes, there's a place down the way. Are you sure it's ok?"

"Yeah. I'm meeting someone here, but they'll be a few minutes," he said motioning her to follow. "So, Khari'sha right?"

As they continued talking, Kyle thought again about what Ackerson said. She had talked all about that whole 'ONI making a difference' thing early on, but maybe there was more truth there than he expected. He just made a difference for this woman and all he did was save her from some bullies. Maybe he could be that Nigerian dude who helped topple Goliath. Maybe he could actually do something as monumental as what the Chief was doing. Or maybe he could just be a nice guy and buy food for a starving Quarian who could be his friend.

Oh well. Maybe working for ONI wouldn't be THAT bad...

* * *

><p>Codex Entry (Human History): The Goliath Uprising

The Human-Covenant War caused numerous infrastructure shake-ups for Earth's national governments. Among the hardest hit were the nations of the African continent, which took the brunt of the Covenant invasion force along with the short lived outbreak of the parasitic Flood. Civil wars and political maneuverings plagued the continent for years as groups fought to fill the power vacuums.

_ The most dominant of these groups was the private military company Goliath, led by radical nationalist Sergei Polonska. Polanska's troops were originally hired to repel Covenant forces attacking the continent's rural civilian populations. Following the war, he felt that the UNSC's recovery efforts were not meeting the needs of the African people. He used his influence to buy out smaller military forces and eliminate notable political opponents in the countries of Nigeria, Ghana and Chad. With such a sizable increase to his fighting force, Polanska planned to forcibly unite the African continent under Goliath's banner._

_ The plans were exposed to the UNSC through undercover ONI intelligence shortly before its execution. Under the authorization of Admiral Hood and the branches' officials, a joint strike team infiltrated Goliath's Nigerian headquarters and assassinated Polanska. Without his command, many of Goliath's soldiers deserted the PMC. Its remaining leaders signed a pact with the UNSC to end their campaign and aid the reconstruction efforts peacefully._
Goliath has remained under the employ of the Alliance ever since.

_ This information has been officially declassified by the Office of Naval Intelligence._

* * *

><p>Annnnddddddâ€¦done. Thank you for those who have been reading so far. Let me know what you think of this chapter in a PM or in the review section. Let's see if I can pump this next chapter out quicker now I'm in the mode to get my other fanfic finished.

14. A Start of Something New

****FIX: Feros, not Therum****

"Heyâ€¦what's that thing poking around in the back? It looks like someone I've seen before, but he's all decrepit and scrawny looking andâ€¦**"**

****GASP!**

>

****Zgamer lives again!****

****That's right. I'm back from my slog of tests, projects and grad school applications to ****

****bring another chapter for you patient readers. Thank you once again for all of the support you provide DinoJake and me. It means a lot to us and we hope to bring you high quality work in return.****

****Which may or may not be the case with this new chapter, as it has been a while, but hopefully this will continue to improve as my creative spark continues to return.****

****So now Kyle and the crew have joined ONI and are taking their first steps into this new and dangerous world. First, however, let's see what Kyle has in his inboxâ€|****

—...—

KYLE NOLAN, you have TWENTY-SIX new extranet messages. Which message would you like to read first?

—...—

_Message TWENTY-SIX. Video message received MARCH 6__th__, 2683 at 8:32 PM CITADEL STANDARD TIME..._

Hi Kyle. It's Kharisha...um, Khari. I'm sure you're busy, so I won't take long. Thanks again for letting me keep in touch. I've never had a human pen-pal before...not to presume you and I are just going to write back and forth mindlessly with no intention to...um...Oh Keelah, this isn't going well...

—Jump Cut—

Hey Kyle, it's Khari. I hope everything's going well.

Life's ok back at the Citadel. My landlord's a real boshtet, but I can put up with it for a little longer. I met a buyer in the Lower Wards who'll give me a small discount on their apartment. It's the best I can manage with what I've scraped together. Sometimes I feel like going back to the Flotilla would solve everything, but I justâ€|don't feel ready. There's so much more to learn out here. Quitting now would make it all pointless. Besides, my family barely has two credits to rub together as it is, so it wouldn't help much.

It seems like that Master Chief guy is everywhere these days. Half the stories on my social network feeds are about something he did, where he came from or his latest accomplishment. I guess it's a dull day if he hasn't crushed a Geth Juggernaut with his bare hands. At least those stories are better than the ones about all the women wanting toâ€|well, I'll censor the grosser details, but let's just say that a woman from every race wants to piece of the Chief. Gah, what that Sangheilli woman said was the worstâ€|

It must be nice to have a hero everyone looks up to. Quarrians have heroes of course, but none that destroyed a Halo and prevented a genocidal massacre. We'd probably get a lot more respect if we did though.

_Sorry. Here I am rambling about my "exciting" life and you're off making the galaxy a better place. You wouldn't think socializing would be hard on the Citadel, butâ€|well, it's either clingy Quarrians

who won't socialize outside their own race or everyone else who won't socialize with a Quarrian. It's nice to have someone to talk to, even if it's a one-sided conversation like this._

I'm sure you've done a lot these last few weeks. I'm not sure how human soldiers handle things differently than Quarrian soldiers, but I'd love to hear it all the same.

Soâ€|um, stay safe. The galaxy's a scary place, but I'm sure you're tough enough to handle it. Let me know if I can do anything to help

_. . . _

End of message. Reply?

â€|

1025 Hours, March 7th, 2683

The Skies of Xawin

Strennus System, Horse Head Nebula

â€|

Kyle felt a pat on his shoulder as the Kodiak rumbled into its final descent. He turned to see Beckett, fully decked out in her armor, pointing to her helmet. Realizing, he put his own helmet on. It was probably best not to jump out onto a below freezing planet without being fully protected.

He must have been distracted again. To be fair, he had a lot on his mind. On top of being assigned to one of the most influential shadow organizations in the galaxy, there was also the nagging issue of a horde of genocidal robots on a galactic rampage. His team hadn't encountered them yet, but he was not going to be unprepared when they did. Tangilanu had been sharing extranet articles and other documents to the rest of the team to plan out effective combat strategies. Funny enough, the most helpful sources have been the glimpses of camera feeds seeing the Master Chief fighting them. Kyle doubted he could gut check a Geth Juggernaut the way the Chief could, but it couldn't hurt to know it was possible.

The Kodiak rumbled again, prompting Kyle to check his gear and team. He unfolded his new M7SR-5 Submachine gun and did a quick maintenance check. Everything seemed to be in place. The element zero chambers were functioning, the heat sink was optimal and everything else seemed to be in pristine condition. For all the hoopla about how mysterious ONI was, they had some pretty incredible hardware at their disposal. It made his usual Hurricane model seem very archaic in comparison.

His finger flipped the safety off, folded it up again and checked his team. Beckett, Tangilanu and La Rosa had followed his lead as they finished priming their gear. Everyone seemed comfortable at the moment. It was still weird to see his team wearing ONI insignias on their ODST armor though. He always figured the two branches to be apples and oranges, so this felt like a 'one of these things isn't like the other' situations. The change in color scheme didn't help

either, as the blander ONI colors clashed against the flashier ODSF logos. At least it was better than those bulky ONI marines outfits.

Which was made clearly aware as he glanced over at Falana and the other four marines across the way. Falana was busy consulting her omni-tool for intel, but the other marines just sat like deactivated LOKI droids waiting to be activated. Kyle figured they had their own means of preparing for combat, but it was just odd. They'd be groundside soon enough, so they shouldn't wait too long.

As if Falana heard his thoughts, she switched off her omni-tool, stood up and turned to the group.

"Ten-hut!" She barked.

Like a synchronized maneuver, the ONI marines promptly stood up, unfolded their MA5G Assault Rifles and stood at attention. Kyle motioned for his team to do the same.

"Longley," Falana said through a new TEAMCOM channel. "What's our ETA?"

"LZ's nearly clear, ma'am," Longley, the Mare Erythraeum's top pilot, replied with his tempered Southern drawl. "Buggers put up a good fight. Gonna make one more pass."

"Copy that," Falana said closing the channel and directing back to the team. "Alright. We've got a VIP trapped on this ice hole and ONI wants him back in one piece. There's a level one cold hazard between us and our objective, so I want us inside that base faster than a frog out of hot water. The longer we wait, the more time those merc bastards have to fight back."

It was weird for Kyle to be on this side of the chain of command again. Being promoted to 1st Lieutenant didn't outrank Captain Falana, so she was in command whenever she decided to join the mission. Which wouldn't be so bad if she hadn't refused to acknowledge Kyle's presence or give him an assignment. If this was her idea of payback for his little stint on Mavigon, he got the hint. At least Ackerson made it clear that he was automatically part of any mission that required ODSF presence, which would pretty much be all of them from now on. He had to grin and bear it for now like Beckett said.

"All clear, ma'am," Longley called out on the TEAMCOM. "We'll keep an eye out for stragglers but you're good to drop."

"Copy all," Falana replied before banging on the Kodiak's pilot door. "Henson, put us in front of the door."

"Roger, ma'am," the woman piloting the ship replied.

The Kodiak dipped a few more degrees as right hatch opened in front of Kyle. The snowstorm outside swirled like crazy and huge clumps of snow smacked against the shuttle's sides. It seemed like every planet Kyle had been on the last few missions was a snow planet. What he wouldn't give to be dropped into a nice, tropical environment next timeâ€¦

The ONI marines lined up behind Kyle ready to jump off. Kyle figured he should have his team do the same.

"Fall in," he ordered as Beckett, Tangilanu and La Rosa lined up on both sides of him.

"Freaking snowâ€|" Beckett said over their private TEAMCOM channel.

"Well at least we won't reek of sweaty shit," La Rosa replied. "Last time I was on a hot planet, my suit smelled like my old sports locker."

"What, like you didn't already?" Tangilanu chimed as the Kodiak circled towards the door.

The ONI Broadsword fighters made quick work of the base's exterior defenses. Giant missile holes burned out of several turrets and there was no shortage of dead mercenaries littering the barricades by the door. It would have taken Kyle's team an extra half hour to muscle past all of that alone.

Snow blew away from the Kodiak as it came to a level hover above the ground.

"Pile out! Go! Go!" Falana barked.

Kyle and his team jumped out of the Kodiak, landing with a staggered snow-cushioned thud. As they rushed to the door, he heard Falana and the marines follow suit in a more unified thud. At this rate, he wouldn't be surprised if they shit in unison tooâ€|

"Get to the door," Kyle ordered Tangilanu as the ONI marines created a defensive perimeter around the door looking for any other opposition.

"On it, boss," Tangilanu replied opening his omni-tool before coming to a stop and syncing with the door's security. At least Kyle could still feel in charge of his team to some degree.

"Circle back with Longley's squad and be ready for extraction," Falana said to Henson as the Kodiak ascended back into the sky.

After a few more seconds, the door's lock flashed green and slid open.

"We're in," Tanglianu called back.

Without missing a beat, the marines marched inside with Falana right behind them.

"You're welcome too," Tangilanu muttered to himself as the rest of them followed.

The door closed behind them as they waited for the base's airlock and temperature system to reset. Once the all clear was given, the marines moved to the main entrance to prepare for a breach. Two of them pushed some of the smaller boxes to create quick cover for their attack.

"Pavel," Falana called out to one of the marines. "Give me an estimate."

The two marines with the boxes finished what they were doing and moved to the wall next to the door. One of them unfolded a weird looking rectangular device from his back and they stretched it out against the wall. Pavel then opened his omni-tool, which Kyle was close enough to look over his shoulder and see the feed that opened up. The rectangular device was creating an infrared scan of the interior, tagging several blurred shapes moving about inside.

"Estimated ten tangerines in the main area," Pavel replied. "Eight standard with two heavies, most likely Krogan with a possible Jiralhanae."

"Any sign of the VIP?" Falana asked.

"Negative ma'am. I see a possible casualty on the ground, but I can't confirm."

"Alright. We're going to jump the bastards hard and fast once we breach the doors. Tangilanu, Sorkin and Farrell will start with flash bangs. I'll provide biotic cover upfront while Pavel brings up the rear to check for additional threats. La Rosa, focus on the heavies. Beckett, you're our scout. Find the VIP before any harm can come to them.

And, of course, there were no orders for Kyle.

"Nolan, cover Beckett." Beckett said through their private channel mocking Falana's voice.

"You don't need anyone covering you," he said to her.

"Well, it would give your neglected ass something productive to do."

Kyle smirked at that.

"Gah, you guys make me sick," La Rosa groaned overhearing them.

"Ma'am!" Pavel then said to Falana with some concern.

"What?"

"They're bring out something big in there."

Falana checked his feed as Kyle got a funny feeling about something. He noticed that the lock had now shifted from red to green and was preparing to open. Sorkin and Farrell hadn't noticed and

"Get away from the door!" Kyle shouted too late.

The door slid open and a hail of plasma erupted from the other side. Large burning holes riddled Sorkin's body as Farrell narrowly dove out of the way.

"Defensive positions!" Falana barked opening a biotic barrier as Farrell moved back to the squad. As she did, a small circular object was flung from the door onto a crate near them.

"Flash bang!" Farrell shouted.

"Get down!" Kyle barked shielding his visor. The marines and ODST scattered as the flash bang went off. A flurry of white, blinding light filled the room as Kyle unfolded his pistol.

The grenade must have had some sort of chaff attached to it, as his electronics went fuzzy for a few seconds. Falana's garbled profanities buzzed in his ear as he reset his equipment and checked for his team's tags. All of them registered green as he peeked from the crate he hid behind.

"Move in!" A human called out from the doorway as something big hovered into the corridor.

As he expected, the plasma fire came from a mobile defensive auto turret. From behind the device, several mercenaries ducked up behind the barricades the ONI marines had made and open fired on them. Farrell and Pavel attempted to return fire, but the whirring of the turret forced them to duck quickly and avoid the barrage of plasma.

"ONI scum!" A Krogan mercenary shouted firing a rocket against Falana's crate.

"Take down the heavies!" Falana shouted as she shot back with her BR150HB SR Battle Rifle. A human merc next to the Krogan took a round to the head, but that frog wouldn't go down easy. Falana threw a biotic blast at the frog, knocking him back slightly, as she ducked back down to avoid the plasma fire.

Kyle watched as his team and the other soldiers tried their best to shoot back, but were continually suppressed by the turret and merc weapons. They couldn't wait here trying to play whack-a-mole with these bastards. Soon they would start walking towards-

Then Kyle got an idea.

He stood up quickly and sniped a Turian merc to his left with his Submachine gun before ducking back down to avoid the turret fire.

"Tangilanu!" He shouted motioning him to imitate his action.

Getting the hint, Tangilanu unfolded his M45M Double Barreled Tactical Shotgun and shot at the lead Krogan. The frog took a step back as he shields collapsed and Tangilanu ducked to avoid the turret fire.

Beckett then followed this and took out another merc next to that Krogan. Then La Rosa took a potshot before ducking. Then Farrell. Then Pavel.

Kyle smirked to himself. Maybe they could play whack-a-mole after all!

"RRAAGGHHHHH!"

or not.

The Krogan, now shimmering with a biotically charged barrier, charged shoulder first towards Tangilanu and Farrell. The two of them dove out of the way as the frog slammed their crate backwards. This, however, caused them to be exposed to the plasma turret's line of fire.

"Go!" Beckett shouted to Kyle as she fired directly at the turret, drawing its fire momentarily.

Kyle wasn't exactly sure what Beckett expected him to do, but he decided to roll with it. He rushed from his crate as the Krogan turned its attention to Tangilanu and Farrell. This was stupid, but sometimes stupid paid off better than expected. As he reached the Krogan, Kyle used his synthetic hand to throw a running punch directly into the frog's face. It connected with a fleshy thud, knocking the guy back a few steps and allowing the other two soldiers a chance to escape.

Kyle aimed his gun at the Krogan's gut, but felt something powerful stop all of his limbs at the last moment. A shimmer of biotic energy constricted around his body and lifted him into the air. Kyle glanced to the side to see that a human merc was the source of the problem here. Of course! It would be too easy if he could just do his job quickly.

With a flick of their wrist, the merc positioned Kyle right in front of the turret's line of sight. The turret whirred as it prepared to tear Kyle to shreds

until the biotic merc's head exploded into chunky bits. Kyle was able to see Tangilanu's shotgun was the cause of his rescue, but not before he landed onto the ground with a loud thud. After taking a second to recover, he attempted to scramble back to his feet.

Unfortunately, it still wouldn't be that simple. A large hand grabbed his leg and flung him into a nearby wall. Kyle gasped as the wind was knocked out of him again, but he had little time to react as that goddamn Krogan aimed its shotgun at his head. Kyle lifted his submachine gun hoping to shoot first.

Just then, the explosion from a biotic charge struck the Krogan from behind, knocking him onto the ground. It groaned for a moment with a low murmur before collapsing dead. So maybe Kyle wasn't completely unlucky. He looked up to see that his savior this time was Captain Falana? Well, not exactly what he expected.

"Thanks," he said giving her a thumbs up.

She didn't reply as she put up a barrier and returned fire at the now retreating mercs.

"Get that turret down," Falana said to Tangilanu and Pavel, who were now running to reach the turret's controls. Everyone else kept the turret occupied now that they had less mercs to fight back.

Kyle hid behind a nearby crate to catch his breath and checked his teammate tags. Everyone seemed to be in good condition, with Sorkin being the only casualty so far. Poor guy didn't even get to fire a shot.

"Anytime you feel like it, lieutenant," La Rosa said as he and the other marines fired against the mercs. A human and Kig-Yar used a pair of energy shields Roman style to help the other mercs retreat back into the main hall. Before Kyle could join in the fight, the mercs sealed the door.

"Shit!" Beckett cursed.

It wasn't all a loss though. Right as the doors closed, the turret's head tilted downward and the whirring of its gears came to a loud screech before slowly descending into silence.

"Hot damn!" Tangilanu cheered as he high fived Pavel.

"Form up!" Falana shouted to the rest of the team.

Anyone still hiding behind the crates rushed out to meet the team at the door.

"We barely made it through that," Falana continued. "But we're not done until we find the VIP. I-" She looked over to Tangilanu and Pavel. "Feel like decrypting the door lock, boys?"

"Sorry, ma'am," Pavel said as the two of them opened their omni-tools and got to work. Kyle rolled his eyes. Now she expected everyone to read her mind. At least Kyle would give his guys a hint to guess what he was thinking.

"We thinned out most of the resistance," Falana said. "But they're likely to have reinforcements waiting inside. I don't want any more surprises, so we will proceed cautiously untilâ€"

"Shit!"

Falana turned to Pavel and Tangilanu as their omni-tools flashed red.

"What now?" She asked exasperated.

"The decryption's mutating," Tangilanu muttered. "It's going to take a few minutes to break."

"We don't have a few minutes! Do it faster."

"Well unless you want to punch your way through the door, this is the best we-."

"Oh for God's sake," Kyle muttered as he moved Pavel and Tangilanu away from the door lock. It wasn't a terribly sophisticated model of lock, with a thin layer of plastic separating the main mechanism from the circuits inside.

"Kyle, stop!" Falana said too late as he punched through the plastic with his synthetic fist and pulled out a handful of wires.

To his surprise, the doors actually started to open.

"Hey, what do you know?" He joked as he tossed the wires aside and walked into the main room. "Sometimes you can brute force yourâ€" "

His sentence was cut off as a plasma shot whizzed past his ear, shattering his kinetic barrier.

"Get down!" Falana barked as the other marines scattered behind the door's sides.

Kyle rolled to a nearby wall and pressed his back against it. Shit! They still had a sniper at their disposal. He peeked his head out slightly to see a Kig-Yar with a Type 60 Particle Beam Rifle on the second floor of the base. He managed to duck his head back to avoid another shot aimed for his head.

"Stop it, Nolan!" Falana shouted at him.

"The bastard's on the secondâ€" "

"I see him!" She interrupted him as she looked to some people out of Kyle's line of sight. "Put out some suppressing fire for him."

Kyle thought she was referring to him before he saw two pairs of feet poke out from the side of the door. It looked like he was going to wait for whatever they had planned to happen.

"Cover!" She shouted to the TEAMCOM as she laid down a barrier and Farrell poked out to fire at the sniper. Kyle joined in with some blind fire from his Submachine gun La Rosa sprinted towards his position. He managed to duck past two sniper shots before slamming against the wall.

"Miss me?" La Rosa teased between breaths.

"Hell no," Kyle joked as he prepped his submachine gun. "You get a good look at his position?"

"Not yet. Help me get over there."

La Rosa pointed to another wall across the room, which concerned Kyle as he noticed there was little to no cover between the two points.

"Think you're that fast?" Nolan said.

"Sure. I've done it in a couple of matches before. Should be a piece of cake."

That didn't reassure Kyle, but it would have to do.

"Alright," he said lifting his gun. "I'll give you some covering fire. Try to zigzag to stagger the bastard's line of sight-"

"Yeah yeah. I got it," La Rosa said preparing another sprint.

"Ok. Oneâ€|two-"

"Grenades!" Beckett shouted through the TEAMCOM.

Before they could finish their count, three primed grenades landed by Kyle and La Rosa's feet.

"Shit!" La Rosa shouted as they ran out from their position. The grenades exploded in a flurry of fire and plasma behind them, leaving the two open for any incoming fire. Which came almost instantly as a sniper round struck La Rosa's shields near the chest.

"Gah!" He shouted as he followed Kyle through the gunfire. They were sitting ducks out in the open.

"Move in!" Falana shouted as she put up a barrier to help the marines cover fire.

It was now or never, Kyle realized. He led La Rosa to the position they pointed out earlier as rounds impacted his newly recovered kinetic barrier. After a few more heightened seconds, the two of them dove behind the cover, narrowly dodging a missile that exploded right behind them.

"Kill that son of a bitch!" Kyle shouted as La Rosa leapt to his feet and adjusted his scope.

"Vete al diablo," La Rosa muttered in Spanish as he quickly aimed and fired.

A shriek from across the way marked a confirmed kill.

"He's down!" La Rosa said to the TEAMCOM as he got back to cover.

"Good work," Falana replied. "Get up there andâ€"

"Stop!" A screechy Unggoy voice from across the way shouted. "We surrender!"

Everyone was caught a little off guard as the shooting immediately stopped.

"â€|come again?" Falana shouted to the merc.

"No more! Please. Take the man. We don't want to die!"

"Umâ€|ok, where's Willem?"

"He in that room. Between big crates!"

Kyle glanced ahead to see the room in question. Of course it would be the only door with a red lock on it. Subtlety wasn't a merc's best trait.

"Why are we doing this?" Another merc grumbled.

"Shut it, dick head! You wanna die too?"

Falana glanced over to Kyle and La Rosa before looking back to the merc again. "Throw your weapons over the ledge and come down with

your hands over your head. If we see even a hint off-"

Before she could finish, two plasma rifles, a particle beam rifle and an Avenger rifle were unceremoniously chucked off the second story railing.

"We come down! No shoot."

Kyle heard Falana sigh in relief as she pointed to the stairway. "Get over there and secure them. Tangilanu and Pavel, open that door and get Willem out of here."

Kyle folded his weapon and followed La Rosa to help out.

"Nolan!" Falana said. Kyle turned and saw Falana point back towards the entrance they came from. "Go secure Sorkin for extraction."

Well now she gives him something to do.

"Let someone else do it," He replied. "I'm heading this mission too, you know?"

"Not while I'm around, _first lieutenant_," she said emphasizing that title.

Kyle walked past without acknowledging her he heard the mercs be apprehended. Now he had to babysit the casualties. He figured he was past this point.

He entered the entranceway and found Sorkin where they left him. The plasma holes in his body had cooled down, creating a distinct brunt skin odor his helmet's filters picked up on. Thankfully, the plasma had missed Sorkin's dogtags. Not that anyone would know exactly how Sorkin died. Part of the NDA every ONI member signed classified almost every major detail of your service, from your accomplishments to your death. Granted, the plasma holes might give people a clue in Sorkin's case.

As he prepped for extraction, he heard chatter on the TEAMCOM that concerned him.

"Captain Falana..." Tangilanu's voice trailed.

"What?"

"I uh...its Willem."

The Captain's footsteps sped walk to Tangilanu's position. The pause it caused was felt throughout the building as everyone waited for what would happen.

"Captain, wait!" Tangilanu said as her footsteps angrily walked back to where the mercs were detained.

"Care to explain?" Falana accused someone as her pistol unfolded.

"It...it was an accident?" that Unggoy merc squeaked.

A single pistol shot silenced that Unggoy immediately. Kyle stood up

to stop Falana, but saw Beckett in the distance lift a hand stop him. It's not like he could make things get worse.

"Anyone want to give me a better answer?"

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"Willem's...dead?"

The holographic image of the human politician Garoth sorrowfully asked. Major Ackerson nodded as they communicated through the Mare Erythraeum's QEC.

It had been half an hour since the ship left Xawin. Kyle and Falana waited outside of the QEC's field of vision as Ackerson relayed the bad news. Turns out that the VIP was dead before they even got to the base. The Unggoy who surrendered got overzealous and shot him in cold blood when Willem talked back at them. He had attempted to surrender hoping to explain himself, but Falana wasn't having it. The other mercs got to live, but were now pinned with an additional accessory to murder charges on top of kidnapping. Kyle figured that was only slightly better than death in retrospect, but it wouldn't help Garoth much.

"I'm sorry," Ackerson replied. "The mercs were contracted by Privateers to hold your brother for ransom. From what I was told, he was brave and defiant until to very end."

Garoth choked back his sorrow as he thought of a way to respond. Kyle knew she made up that part, but he kept quiet.

"I should have expected this," he finally said. "When we lost contact with the Majesty, I just knew he was dead. I kept hoping he was alive, but I just knew...I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"Don't be," Ackerson replied. "I would do no less for my own family. Just be sure that his killers have either been killed or will be punished with the full power of the law. I know that won't bring him back to you, but it's the best justice we can offer."

"Thank you and thank you for finding him. I guess it's better to know one way or another."

"I wholeheartedly agree. It'll take a few days to properly transfer him, but I give you my word he will be promptly returned in one piece."

"Thank you, Major. If there is any way to repay you for this, I would be more than happy to oblige."

"We'll keep that in consideration, but tend to your family first. You have our thoughts and prayers. Ackerson out."

The lights slowly shined back on as the QEC reset. Ackerson followed suit, as her 'tender face' disappeared into her usually stoic demeanor.

"What's Willem's status, Samuel?" She immediately asked the ship's VI.

"Captain Willem is currently in cryo preservation until further notice, ma'am."

"Make sure he's prepped for transfer when we get the chance. Sorkin too."

She exited the room without saying a word. Kyle took the hint as he and Falana followed the Major.

"I want both of you to run the men through breach simulations until they can do it with their eyes closed," Ackerson spoke to no one in particular as they kept walking.

"Yes, ma'am," Kyle replied automatically before Falana could answer. "Don't want this shit to happen again."

Ackerson lifted a hand that stopped everyone. Kyle raised an eyebrow as he watched Ackerson slowly turn to face him. After a few quiet seconds, she crossed her arms and stared him down with that icy glare of hers.

"So you admit that everything you did down there was shit?" She asked him.

Kyle looked to Falana confused, but she didn't offer any help.

"Well?"

"No," Kyle replied. "I justâ€¦we put all that work into this and we couldn't even save the VIP. And Sorkin died because of it."

The Major nodded hearing his response and smacked her lips as Kyle could see her form a reply.

"Does the ODSST teach about the value of strategic political maneuvering, lieutenant?" She asked.

"Hm?"

"Thought so," Ackerson sighed as she uncrossed her arms. "I had a feeling Willem was dead before we even planned the rescue attempt. So the 'immediate' objective was going to be a failure no matter what. However, this allowed me to consider more opportune benefits for our involvement

Garoth is an important petitioner for human interests on the Citadel. Without his direct contributions, the Council wouldn't have granted humanity so many policy concessions. So imagine how much our progress would be delayed if Garoth was overly preoccupied with a missing relative.

Optimistically, the best scenario would have been to bring Willem alive and well back home. Since that wouldn't be the case though, we instead put the extra effort in to bringing closure to a tragic incident. Those who committed the murder were punished and those associated will rot in an Alliance prison. So we not only bring ease to poor Garoth's worried mind, but we now have an obligation from him to match our efforts. Losing a man in the process only increases his

commitment."

"So Sorkin was just a pawn in a political maneuver," Kyle replied.

"Sorkin gave his life to protect our interests. I expect no less from you, given your division's reputation for heroic sacrifices. Now that Garoth knows what we're willing to do, he's more than willing to return an extra favor for us. It could be a deciding vote to influence Alliance Citadel politics or a simple bill to bring extra funding to human housing in the Lower Wards. Whatever the case, we can use him to benefit both ONI and general human interest."

Ackerson seemed to have another thought on that topic, but stopped herself with an abrupt pause. "Before I sound completely inconsiderate to the situation though, I do have to ask the both of you something. Why were Sorkin and Farrell standing in the way of plasma fire when the mercs fought back?"

Kyle and Falana didn't reply.

"You got nothing for me?" Ackerson replied with condescension glancing back and forth at them.

"It was an accident," Kyle answered.

"Accidents don't happen on my missions, lieutenant. I can account for an act of God or whoever the hell controls inexplicable situations, but this was a simple breach mission. I brought you onto this ship to make sure accidents didn't happen. You know, that myth about the ODST boosting moral and combat quality on the ships they're on. Far as I'm concerned, I haven't seen any of that rubbing off on my men yet."

Kyle could see Falana smirk out of the corner of his vision, but, unfortunately for Falana, Ackerson saw it too.

"Oh is that funny, Kya?" Ackerson said glaring at her, wiping that smirk clean off. "At least the lieutenant can be accounted for new guy stupidity. How long have you been training Sorkin?"

"Three months," Falana replied quickly. "I ordered him to assemble a barricade to--"

"So in those three months, Sorkin never learned how to assemble an impromptu barricade and then quickly move away from an obvious attack point? Or somehow Pavel was unable to register a plasma turret when using an infrared scanner?"

"We didn't expectâ€œ"

"You ALWAYS expect the unexpected when doing these goddamn missions!" Ackerson snapped at her. "In case I need to remind the two of you, neither of you are in charge of these soldiers. I am! If one of them dies on a mission, you both are responsible for killing one of MY soldiers. If they do well, you're both responsible for helping one of MY soldiers do well. I'm lending them to you because I can only be in one goddamn place at a time and I expect you to be responsible for bringing everyone back from a no brainer mission!"

Kyle and Falana stood there awkwardly staring towards the ground as Ackerson stopped her rant.

"From now on, first thing every morning training session, you will cooperatively teach every soldier how to breach from the moment they leave a shuttle until the objective is complete. And if it still doesn't help, I may have to reconsider whom I choose to lead MY troops. Because no self-respecting ONI leader would make such an amateurish mistake, whether they're a goddamn FNG or a professional. We're all going to be on the same page. Am I clear on that?"

The two leaders waited for a few seconds before nodding.

"Goodâ€¦" Ackerson said softening her tone. "Isn't it great when we're all agreeable?"

The Major's omni-tool then flashed and chimed.

"Ackerson," she responded.

"Ma'am," Samuel's voice spoke through the tool. "You have a priority distress call that requires your immediate attention."

"Understood," she said closing her tool and looking to the other two. "I think we've said enough today. Get some rest."

The Major walked off by herself, leaving the other two to awkwardly stand in silence. Somehow, being chewed out like that was more embarrassing than any other before and he wasn't exactly sure why. He had to suck it up though. They were playing by the Major's crazy rules now.

Kyle glanced over to the Captain, who sighed through her nostrils as she looked back to him.

"Soâ€¦can we start working together?" He asked.

"I don't know," Falana said crossing her arms. "Can we?"

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"Can you what?" Patricia Henson said lifting her welding visor off.

Kyle and Beckett stood a short distance away as Henson, the other pilots and the maintenance crew worked on patching up the vehicles in the ship's vehicle bay. It was fairly bigger than the _Tokyo's, _but without the friendly Alliance colors to make it feel less oppressive. At least these guys were more approachable than the marines.

"We need to use the Kodiak for a regular breach exercise," Kyle replied. "Major's orders."

"The Major said you needed MY Kodiak specifically?" Henson replied waving across the bay. "We got a bunch more you can use."

"What," A maintenance crewman quipped joining in. "Scared they're going to steal your dashboard toys, Henson?"

"No!" She shouted back before turning to Kyle. "Look, it's not my decision. If you have to use mine, then sure. Talk to Longley first. He's in charge of stuff like that. Otherwise, I got to get this prepped for the next mission so sorry but I got to finish this."

"Alright. Where is he?"

"Back there," Henson said pointing to a Longsword nearby as she put her visor back down. "Just give the hull a tap if he doesn't answer.."

"Sounds good," Kyle said as he led his guys past Henson towards the Longsword.

"Dashboard toys?" Beckett said once they were out of the crew's hearing range.

"Beats me," Kyle shrugged. "I mean, unless she has one of those Asari dancer bobble heads like a taxi driver."

"Well she's a glorified taxi driver anyway. Why isn't Falana here with you, again?"

"It's part of the 'cooperation' thing. I get the practice site set up and she runs the drills. Plus, you're better company than her."

"Hm, sounds like you got the better end of the deal."

Kyle nodded as they ducked under the Longsword's wing and looked up to the cockpit. From the window, Kyle saw what looked like...a cowboy hat hovering over the dashboard. He raised an eyebrow as he looked into the open door in the back.

"Hello?" He called out.

No reply.

"Excuse me?" Kyle asked knocking on the hull.

The cowboy hat stirred as they heard someone stand up and the person wearing the hat walked to the door. He was a rather tall person, maybe a few inches more than Kyle. His hair was grown out enough to slick into a blowback style. A healed over cut on his lip poked through his maintained stubble as he looked up and switched off his earpiece's music function.

"Sorry, sir," the man replied with that familiar tempered drawl Kyle had heard before. "Get carried away when I'm takin' a break. Need somethin'?"

"It's all good," Kyle said as the man exited the ship and walked past them. "Longley, right?"

"Correct-a-mundo," Longley replied picking up a jacket decorated with badges draped over the wing's tip. "Devon Longley. How can I help ya?"

"You in charge of coordinating drills here?"

"No. Who said I was?"

"They did," Kyle said pointing back to Henson and the others.

"Did they?" Longley said rolling his eyes and tilting his head up to shout out. "Henson, you sonna bitch!"

"Can't hear you!" Henson called back.

"You gonna hear me when I wedge my pointy boot up your asshole!"

"That's sounds like gender discrimination to me!"

"This here's an equal opportunity hangar! I kick my boot up anyone's ass if they give me lip and I got the protected right to do it! Where the hell's Carter?"

>"Staff meeting with the mobile armor crew! You're in charge when he's gone!"<p>

"Well that's all I needed to know! Thank you very much!"

"Eat a dick and you're welcome!"

Longley finished as he directed back to Kyle and Beckett, who were definitely amused by the interaction. "That's what friends are for, am I right?" Longley joked. "Alright look, technically Carter approves stuff in the hangar, but I'll relay to him whatever you need. So what can I do?"

"We just need to borrow a Kodiak and partition part of the hangar for morning breach drills," Beckett said.

"Breach drills? Ah, guess the Major chewed ya out about the mission."

Kyle grumbled quietly in reply.

"Yup, thought so. One of them anal types, she is. 'Ya lose a pilot, yer loosin' one of MY pilots,'" Longley said imitating Ackerson in his drawl as he picked up some tools.

"You got that same speech, too?" Kyle said recognizing that phrase.

"First mission in charge after the Spooks conscripted me," Longley replied picking up a tool kit. "Assumin' that's how y'all joined up too, right? Anyway, lost a pilot fightin' a squad of Batarian fighters in some armpit of space. There weren't anythin' I could do to stop it, but I got the talk anyway. And believe me, it ain't just bark when she says that stuff. You should've seen what she did to the guy I got the job from."

Kyle nodded as they followed Longley back to the Longsword. He still remembered executing those crime ring bosses at her order. She wasn't afraid to shed blood, even if not by her own hands. He doubted she would actually kill crewmembers though.

"Beauty, ain't she?" Longley said setting his tools by the ship door and admiring the frame.

"Guess so," Beckett replied looking at the ship. "You don't see many Longswords on other Alliance ships."

"Yeah. Most everyone switched to those new lighter crafts cause they're 'cost efficient.' You want a real ship to get you through a mission though, you use a Broadsword or Longsword."

"Why's that?"

"Ya know. More durable, better weaponry, stronger anti-GARDIAN capabilities..."

"Easier to shoot down," Kyle added noticing the size.

"Not with the right pilot, they ain't. Give it to a cowboy like me and I'll waltz circles around any MAC cannon or 'standard' fighter craft you can throw at me."

"Yeah about that," Kyle said pointing to Longley's hat. "Does Ackerson let you wear that on missions?"

"Only when she can't see me," Longley said tipping the hat up as he scraped some plasma burns. "Makes me feel closer to home."

"Where's that?"

"Austin Prime, New Republic of Texas. Or was the accent a giveaway?"

"I was going to guess that or Dallas," Beckett added.

Longley chuckled and smirked glancing towards her. "The lady knows her Texas."

"I've met a few guys from Austin on a previous ship. Not my type, but--"

"Anyway," Kyle said hoping to bring the conversation back to the main point. "Think we can run the drills here?"

Longley finished his cleaning and thought it over. "Well, I'll have to speak to Carter but I think we can manage it. You just got to keep out of our way when we do our maintenance routines."

Kyle sighed in relief. "Good."

"Y'all got a pilot in mind for the drill?"

"Guess it depends on whose Kodiak we can use."

"That doesn't matter," Longley scoffed hearing that. "Ackerson lends them to Carter, Carter lends them to me and I lend them to whom I choose. So if I were to specifically say that I needed to pilot 'Henson's Kodiak' for yer drill, I could do it in a heartbeat."

"Are you volunteering?"

"Eh, I dunno," Longley shrugged before pausing. "...ah what the hell, sure. Just gimme the time and I'll be there."

"Will do-" Kyle said as his omni-tool beeped and he replied. "Nolan here."

"We need you in the briefing room," Falana's voice replied. "A priority assignment just came in."

Kyle motioned for Beckett to follow him to the elevator. He gave a thumbs up to Longley as they walked, who returned it with his own as he adjusted his hat to get back to work.

"Well the break was nice while it lasted," Beckett said as she walked beside Kyle.

Kyle nodded as he returned to the comm. call. "Alright, where do they want us?"

"Wellâ€¦" Falana paused as he heard her check a file. "â€¦ever been to Feros?"

**...**

_**Codex Entry (Alliance): **__Military â€" 'Sword' Fighters__

The 'Sword' division of fighter craft, manufactured by the Martian based company Misriah Armory, has been the dominant starfighter for human naval combat for many year. An evolution from the YSS-1000 'Sabre' starfighters, they served as the backbone for aerial and interstellar combat during the Human-Covenant War.

The primary model for space combat is currently the F-47 Exoatmospheric Multirole Strike Fighter, designated the 'Broadsword.' Built to withstand the most extreme zero gravity conditions, these fighters are equipped with two mass accelerator ASW guns and missile launchers that can combat both starfighters and large scale cruisers. With its powerful engines and strong frame to boost, the Longsword rivals the Sangheilli Seraph fighter as the strongest individually piloted spacecraft in Citadel space.

The secondary model is the GA-TL7 Interceptor, designated as the 'Longsword-class.' A standard Longsword fighter can house up to four crewmembers to maintain the variety of weapons onboard, including two Rotary mass accelerator cannons, an ASW gun, ASGM-20 missiles, a Hyper Ventral Gun and other customizable armaments. Because of this increase in arsenal, and the ship's notable size compared to the Broadsword, Longswords are often used for support in their respective missions. Often Longswords will be seen as bombers to soften defenses for ground forces or for other Broadwords. Nonetheless, a Broadsword is perfectly capable of withstanding full attacks on its own.

Following the Human-Covenant War, however, other companies worked overtime to produce newer and more affordable craft that implemented mass effect technology in different ways. Because of this, the 'Sword' models have fallen out of grace from mainstay Alliance use. However, special operation forces, such as the Office of Naval Intelligence, continue to use these models for high stakes operations and 'Swords' are often brought in for large scale battles when the demand is needed.

—...—

****And with that, this chapter is concluded. Now we're off to catch up with the Chief's trail and hopefully meet back up with TLS for some good fun. Stay tuned. I promise the next chapter will come sooner than before.****

End
file.